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МИХАИЛ
ШОЛОХОВ

ТИХИЙ
ДОН

РОМАН
В ЧЕТЫРЕХ
КНИГАХ

КНИГА
ЧЕТВЕРТАЯ

MIKHAIL
SHOLOKHOV

AND QUIET
FLOWS
THE DON

A NOVEL
IN FOUR BOOKS

BOOK
FOUR

Михаил Шолохов

ТИХИЙ ДОН

Роман в четырех книгах

Книга четвертая

На английском языке

A translation from the Russian

by Stephen Garry

Revised and completed

by Robert Daglish

Designed

by Y. Kopylov

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PART SEVEN

The revolt of the Cossacks of the upper Don, by drawing considerable Red forces away from the Southern Front, enabled the command of the Don Army to regroup its forces covering Novocherkassk without hindrance, and to concentrate a powerful striking force of its most reliable and experienced regiments (principally lower Don Cossacks and Kalmyks) in the Kamenskaya and Ust-Belokalitvenskaya districts. The task of this striking force was to

link up at the right moment with the units of General Fitshalaurov, smash the 8th Red Army's 12th Division, outflank its 13th and Urals divisions, and break through in the north to join up with the insurgent Cossacks.

The plan for concentrating the striking force had been worked out sometime back by General Denisov and his chief-of-staff General Polyakov in the days when they were in command of the Don Army; by the end of May it had been almost completely put into effect. Nearly 16,000 bayonets and sabres with 36 field-guns and 140 machine-guns had been moved up to Kamenskaya; the last cavalry units and crack regiments of the so-called "young army," formed in the summer of 1918 from Cossacks of enlisting age, were on their way to the mustering points.

Meanwhile, surrounded on all sides, the insurgents continued to repel the attacks of the punitive Red forces. In the south, on the left bank of the Don, two insurgent divisions remained stubbornly in their trenches and would not allow the enemy to cross, although along the whole length of the front innumerable Red Army batteries were directing an almost incessant, ruthless artillery bombardment against them. The three other divisions defended the insurgent territory from the west, north, and east, suffering terrible losses, especially on the north-eastern sector, but making no attempt to retreat and holding out steadfastly along the boundaries of the Khoper region.

The company of Tatarsky Cossacks holding the river-bank opposite their own village caused the Red

forces some alarm: growing bored with enforced inactivity, under the cover of night the Cossacks noiselessly crossed on barges to the right bank of the Don, caught a Red Army outpost by surprise, killed four men, and captured a machine-gun. Next day the Reds brought up a battery from below Vyeshenskaya, and it opened a vigorous fire on the Cossack trenches. The moment the shrapnel began to rattle through the trees, the company hurriedly abandoned its trenches and fell back from the river into the heart of the forest. A day later the battery was withdrawn, and the Tatarsky Cossacks reoccupied their positions. The company suffered some losses from the gun-fire: two youngsters belonging to recent reinforcements were killed by fragments of shrapnel, and the company commander's orderly, who had arrived from Vyeshenskaya only just before, was wounded.

After this a comparative lull set in and life in the trenches took its normal course. The Cossacks were frequently visited by their women, who brought bread and home-made vodka at night, though they had no need of provisions, for they had slaughtered two stray calves, and in addition they went fishing in the ponds every day. Christonya was regarded as the chief of the fisheries department. He used a seventy-foot dragnet left on the bank by some refugee, and when fishing he regularly used the net in the deepest part of the ponds, boasting that there was not a pond in all the river-side meadows which he would not wade across.

In the course of a week's incessant fishing Christonya's shirt and *sharovari* became so saturated with

the stench of fish slime that soon Anikushka flatly refused to sleep in the same dug-out with him.

"You stink like a dead sheat-fish! If I live another day with you I'll never be able to touch fish again."

In spite of the mosquitoes Anikushka took to sleeping in the open. Before lying down beside the dug-out he would sweep the sand clear of fish scales and reeking entrails, frowning disgustedly the while, and in the morning Christonya would return from fishing, sit down with calm dignity by the entrance to the dug-out and again set to work cleaning and gutting his catch of carp. Greenish bluebottles swarmed above him and fierce yellow ants marched up in hordes. Anikushka would run up panting, shouting from a distance:

"Can't you find another place? I wish you'd choke yourself with your fish-bones! Keep away, for Christ's sake! That's where I sleep and you're strewing fish-guts all round, you've brought an army of ants to the place and made it stink like Astrakhan!"

Christonya would wipe his home-made knife on his trousers and thoughtfully survey Anikushka's indignant hairless face, then he would say calmly:

"You must have worms, Anikushka, if you can't stand the smell of fish. Why don't you try eating some garlic on an empty stomach, eh?"

Anikushka would go away spitting and cursing.

Their squabbles went on day after day but on the whole the company lived together amicably. There was an abundance of food and all the Cossacks were cheerful, with the exception of Stepan Astakhov.

Possibly he had heard from the other Cossacks, or maybe his heart had warned him, that Aksinya was seeing Grigory at Vyeshenskaya; at any rate he suddenly began to pine, swore without cause at the troop commander, and flatly refused to do picket duty.

He lay all day on a sledge-rug marked with a black brand, sighing and avidly smoking home-grown tobacco. Then he happened to overhear that the company commander was sending Anikushka to Vyeshenskaya for cartridges, and crawled out of his dug-out for the first time in two days. His streaming eyes, swollen with lack of sleep, were dazzled by the light as he gazed distrustfully at the tousled, blindingly brilliant foliage of the swaying trees, the white-maned, wind-driven clouds, and listened to the murmuring of the forest. Then he strode along past the dug-outs to look for Anikushka.

He would not talk to him in front of the other Cossacks but called him aside and asked:

"Find Aksinya in Vyeshenskaya and tell her from me that she's to come and see me. Tell her I'm all lousy, my shirts and trousers are going unwashed, and also tell her—" Stepan was silent for a moment, hiding an embarrassed smile under his moustache, then ended: "Tell her I'm wanting her badly and that I'm hoping to see her soon."

Anikushka arrived at Vyeshenskaya at night and found Aksinya's quarters. After her tiff with Grigory she had returned to live with her aunt. Anikushka conscientiously told her what Stepan had said, but,

to give the words greater weight, added on his own responsibility that Stepan had threatened to come to Vyeshenskaya if she did not turn up.

She heard him out and began to make preparations. Her aunt hurriedly set dough to rise and baked cakes, and two hours later the dutiful wife Aksinya was riding with Anikushka towards the spot where the Tatarsky company was located.

Stepan greeted his wife with suppressed agitation. He gazed searchingly into her face, which he saw was much thinner, and cautiously questioned her, but not once did he make the mistake of asking whether she had seen Grigory. Only once during the talk did he ask, his eyes downcast, his head turned aside:

"But why did you go to Vyeshenskaya that way? Why didn't you cross the river opposite Tatarsky?"

She answered dryly that she had had no opportunity of crossing with strangers, and she had not felt inclined to ask the Melekhovs. Immediately she spoke, she realized that her words implied that the Melekhovs were not strangers, but friends. And she was disconcerted at the thought that Stepan also might understand her to mean that. In all probability he did take her words in that sense. There was a momentary quiver under his brows, and a shadow seemed to pass over his face.

He raised his eyes inquiringly, and understanding the mute question, in her confusion and annoyance with herself she suddenly flushed.

To spare her, Stepan pretended he had not noticed anything and turned to talking of the farm, asking which of their possessions she had managed to conceal

before retreating from their home and whether she had hidden them safely.

She noted her husband's magnanimity and answered his questions, but all the time she felt a certain constraint and, to convince him that all that had happened was of no import, and also to hide her own agitation, she deliberately spoke more slowly, with a methodical restraint and precision.

They sat talking in the dug-out. They were continually being interrupted by Cossacks. First one came in, then another. Christonya arrived and at once prepared for sleep. Seeing that he would have no chance of talking except with others present, Stepan reluctantly cut short the conversation.

With joyful relief Aksinya got up, hurriedly untied her bundle, regaled her husband with the cakes she had brought and, taking the dirty linen from his field-pack, went out to wash it in the marshy pond close by.

In the dawn stillness a dove-grey mist hung over the forest. Heavy with dew, the grass bowed to the earth. Frogs were croaking discordantly in the marshes, and somewhere quite close to the dug-out, behind a flourishing bush of maple, a corn-crake uttered grating cries.

Aksinya went past the bush. From its very crown to the bole, hidden in a dense grassy undergrowth, it was entangled with gossamer. The threads were adorned with the finest of dewdrops, which gleamed like pearls. The crake was silent for a moment, but then, before the grass trodden by Aksinya's bare feet had time to rise again, it once more raised its voice, and

a peewit winging up beyond the marsh called mournfully in answer.

To give herself more freedom of movement, Aksinya threw off her blouse and bodice, waded up to her knees in the steamily warm water of the pond, and began to wash the clothes. Above her, midges swarmed, mosquitoes buzzed. She passed her full, swarthy arm over her face to drive off the mosquitoes. All the time she thought of Grigory and of their quarrel before his departure for his company.

"He may be looking for me already! I'll go back to Vyeshenskaya this very night," she decided irrevocably, and smiled as she thought that she would be seeing Grigory, and that soon there would be a reconciliation between them.

It was strange. Of recent days, whenever she thought of Grigory she never pictured him as he was in reality. Before her eyes arose not the present-day Grigory, the manful giant of a Cossack who had lived through and experienced so much, with eyes puckered wearily, with rusty tips to his black moustache, a premature greyness at the temples, and deep furrows on the forehead—with all the ineradicable traces of hardship experienced during the years of war—but the old Grisha Melekhov, youthfully rough and clumsy in his caresses, with his youthfully thin, round neck and the unconcerned fold of his continually smiling lips. And because of all this, Aksinya felt even greater love and an almost motherly tenderness towards him.

And so now, as with the utmost clarity she recalled every one of those infinitely precious features, she began to breathe heavily, her face broke into a smile,

she straightened up, and throwing her husband's half-washed shirt underfoot and feeling a burning lump in her throat as the sweet tears suddenly started, she whispered: "Curse you, you've got into me for ever!"

The tears were a relief to her, but afterwards the pale-blue morning world around her seemed suddenly to fade in hue. She wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand, threw the hair back from her moist brow, and with misty eyes, long and unthinkingly watched a tiny grey gull slipping over the water to vanish in the rosy filigree of the mist foaming in the wind.

She finished washing the clothes and hung them out on bushes, then went back to the dug-out.

Christonya was awake and was sitting by the entrance, wriggling his gnarled and twisted toes, insistently forcing conversation on Stepan, who lay on his rug, smoking in silence, and obstinately refusing to answer Christonya's questions.

"So you think the Reds won't cross to this side? You don't answer? Well, don't, then! But what I think they'll do is try to cross by the fords.... It'll be by the fords all right. There's nowhere else where they can cross. Or maybe you think they'll send their cavalry to swim the river? Why don't you speak, Stepan? It looks as if the last fight is coming at this spot, and you're lying there like a log!"

Stepan half sat up and answered angrily:

"What are you plaguing me for? A funny lot you all are! Here's my wife come to see me, but there's no getting away from you! You come butting in with your silly talk and won't let a man exchange one word with his woman."

"That's good 'un to talk to!" The disgruntled Christonya got up, drew on his patched sandals over his bare feet, and went out, knocking his head painfully on the top of the door.

"They won't give us a chance of talking here; let's go into the forest," Stepan suggested.

Not waiting for Aksinya's assent, he went towards the entrance. She humbly followed him.

They returned to the dug-out at noon. Cossacks of the Second Troop were lying in the cool shade of an alder bush, and noticing Aksinya and Stepan, the men put down their cards and were silent, exchanging knowing winks, laughing, and sighing affectedly.

Aksinya walked past them, contemptuously twisting her lips, tidying her crumpled white lace-edged kerchief as she went. She was allowed to pass without comment; but Stepan, walking behind her, was hardly level with the Cossacks when Anikushka rose and stepped out from the group. With assumed respect he bowed low to Stepan and said in a loud voice:

"A good holiday to you ... now you've broken your fast!"

Stepan smiled readily. He was glad the Cossacks had seen him and his wife returning from the forest. It would help a little to stop the rumours that he and Aksinya got on badly together. He even shrugged his shoulders youthfully, complacently exhibiting the back of his shirt with the sweat still not dry on it.

At that, encouraged by Stepan's behaviour, the Cossacks laughed and passed lively remarks.

"But she's hot, boys! You could wring out Stepan's shirt. ... It's sticking to his shoulders."

"She's ridden him hard, he's foaming all over."

One youngster stared with rapturous, filmy eyes after Aksinya all the way to the dug-out and distractingly let fall: "In all the wide world you won't find such a beauty, God forgive me!"

To which Anikushka reasonably remarked: "Why, have you tried to find one, then?"

As she heard the unseemly talk the colour ebbed a little from Aksinya's face; she went down into the dug-out, frowning with loathing at the memory of the recent intimacy with her husband and at his comrades' lewd remarks. Stepan realized at once what she was feeling and said in a conciliatory tone:

"Don't be angry with those stallions, Aksinya! It's only because they're starving for it themselves."

"I've got no one to be angry with," she answered numbly as she rummaged in her canvas bag, hurriedly pulling out all the things she had brought for her husband. And still more quietly: "I ought to be angry with myself, but I haven't the heart. . . ."

Somehow they could not find anything to talk about. After ten minutes or so Aksinya rose. "I'll tell him I'm going back to Vyeshenskaya," she thought, but then she remembered that she hadn't brought in his dry linen.

She sat long at the entrance to the dug-out, mending her husband's sweat-rotted shirts and pants, and frequently glancing at the sun as it began to fall from the zenith.

Even so, that day she did not depart. She lacked sufficient resolution. But next morning the sun was hardly risen when she began to get ready. Stepan tried

to detain her, asked her to stay with him for just one more short day; but she refused his request so decisively that he did not attempt to argue and only said before they parted:

"Are you thinking of living at Vyeshenskaya?"

"Yes, for the present."

"Maybe you could stay here with me?"

"It's not wise for me to be here . . . with the Cossacks."

"Maybe you're right," Stepan agreed, but his leave-taking was chilly.

A strong south-easterly wind was blowing. It had come from afar, and tired at night; but towards morning it once more carried the burning heat of the Trans-Caspian deserts to the Don and, falling on the stretches of water-meadow along the left bank, dried up the dew, swept away the mist, and wrapped the chalky spurs of the Donland hills in a pink, sultry haze.

Aksinya took off her sandals and, catching up the edge of her skirt in her left hand (for the dew still lay in the forest), walked lightly along a rarely used forest road. Her bare feet were pleasantly chilled by the damp earth, while the dry wind avidly kissed her plump, naked calves and her neck.

In an open glade, close to a flowering bush of eglantine, she sat down to rest. Somewhere close at hand wild ducks were rustling in the reeds of a half-dried pond; a drake called hoarsely to his mate. Beyond the Don machine-guns were rattling, not rapidly, but almost incessantly, and there were rare bursts of gunfire. The explosions of the shells on this side rumbled like echoes.

Then the firing grew intermittent, and the earth revealed itself to Aksinya in all its hidden sounds: the green, white-edged leaves of the ashes and the moulded, figured oak leaves rustled tremulously in the wind; a steady, muffled sougning came from a thicket of young aspens; far, far off, a cuckoo faintly and mournfully counted out someone's unspent years; as it flew over the pond a crested lapwing called insistently, "peewit, peewit"; some tiny grey bird two paces from Aksinya drank water from a road rut, throwing back its little head and blinking its eyes with pleasure; the velvety, dusty bumble-bees hummed; swarthy wild bees rocked on the crowns of the meadow flowers. Then they vanished, carrying the aromatic pollen into the shady cool of hollow trunks. Juice dripped from the poplar branches. And from under a bush of hawthorn oozed the leavened, pungent scent of rotting leaves.

Sitting motionless, Aksinya drank in the varied scents of the forest. Filled with a marvellous and myriad-voiced sonority, the forest lived its mighty, elemental life. Saturated to overflowing with spring moisture, the water-meadow soil of the glade was sprouting with such a rich variety of grasses that her eyes were bewildered by this wonderful entwining of flowers and herbs.

Smiling, and soundlessly moving her lips, she cautiously touched the stalks of nameless, pale-blue little flowers, then bent her buxom waist to smell them and suddenly caught the languorous perfume of lilies of the valley. Groping with her hands, she found the plant. It was growing right beside her, under an im-

penetrably shady bush. The broad, once green leaves were still jealously protecting from the sun the bent, low-growing stalk, crowned with the drooping snow-white chalices of the flowers. But the leaves, covered with dew and yellow rust, were dying, and the flower itself was already touched by mortal decay: the two lower cups were wrinkled and blackened, and only the upper one, all dressed in the sparkling tears of dew, suddenly flashed in the sunlight with a dazzling, captivating whiteness.

For some reason, in that brief moment while through her tears Aksinya was looking at the flower and breathing in its mournful scent, she recalled her youth and all her long life so meagre in happiness. She must be growing old. . . . When a woman is young does she pause to weep because her heart is caught by a chance memory?

And so in her tears she fell asleep, hiding her tear-stained face in her hands, pressing her wet and swollen cheek against her crumpled kerchief.

More strongly blew the wind, bending westward the crowns of the poplars and willows. The pallid trunk of the aspen swayed, wrapped in a white, seething whirlwind of tossing leaves. The wind dropped to the full-flowering bush of eglantine under which Aksinya was sleeping; then, like a startled flock of green wonder-birds, the leaves flew up with an anxious rustle, sending the rosy, feathery petals flying. Sprinkled with the fading petals of the eglantine, Aksinya slept and heard neither the sullen noises of the forest nor the renewed firing beyond the Don; nor did she feel the

sun in the zenith burning her uncovered head. She awoke when she heard human speech and a horse snorting above her and hurriedly sat up.

Beside her stood a young white-moustached and white-toothed Cossack, holding his saddled, white-nosed horse by the rein. He was smiling broadly, shrugging his shoulders and tapping his foot, and in a rather hoarse but pleasant tenor voice singing the words of a merry song:

*I have fallen and I lie
Peeping round me with one eye.
Peep this way,
Peer that way,
No one to help, ah, well-a-day.
Then I turned my head to look back,
And there behind me stood a Cossack.*

"I can get up without help," Aksinya smiled, and nimbly jumped up, tidying her crumpled skirt.

"Hullo, my dear! Did your legs refuse to serve you or did you just feel lazy?" the cheery Cossack greeted her.

"I dropped off to sleep," she answered, a little abashed.

"Going to Vyeshenskaya?"

"Yes."

"Would you like me to take you there?"

"But what on?"

"You get on the horse and I'll go on foot. You'll treat me. . . ." The young Cossack winked with humorous significance.

"No, you ride and God be with you, but I'll get there on my own feet."

But the Cossack displayed some experience in amatory affairs, and obstinacy also. Taking advantage of Aksinya's preoccupation with her kerchief, with a short but strong arm he embraced her, snatched her to himself, and tried to kiss her.

"Don't play the fool!" she shouted and struck him with her elbow on the bridge of his nose.

"Darling mine, don't struggle! Look how blessed everything is all around. Every creature finds its mate. . . . So let's have our spot of sin too. . . ." he whispered, narrowing his laughing eyes, tickling Aksinya's neck with his moustache.

By no means angrily, Aksinya put out her hands, pushing hard with her palms against the Cossack's brown, sweaty face, and tried to free herself. But he held her firmly.

"You fool! I've got a shameful disease. . . . Let me go!" she pleaded, panting, thinking that such simple cunning would save her from his importunity.

"Ah—but whose disease is the oldest?" the Cossack muttered through his teeth, and suddenly, lightly lifted her off her feet.

Abruptly realizing that the time for joking was past and that the affair was taking a serious turn, with all her strength she struck the Cossack's brown, sunburnt nose with her fist and tore herself away from the arms clinging to her.

"I'm the wife of Grigory Melekhov! You dare come near me, you son of a bitch. . . . I'll tell him, and he'll give you such a. . . ."

Still not believing that her words would take effect, she snatched up a stout dry stick. But the Cossack at once cooled down. Using the sleeve of his khaki shirt to clean his whiskers of the blood which was streaming plentifully from both nostrils, he exclaimed in a chagrined tone:

"You fool! Ah, what a fool of a woman! Why didn't you say so before? Pah, the way the blood's spurting! As if the enemy didn't make us shed enough of it already, here's our own Cossack women beginning to make it flow. . . ."

His face suddenly went grey and unfriendly. While he was washing in water scooped from a roadside puddle, Aksinya hastily turned off the road and swiftly crossed the glade. The Cossack overtook her some five minutes later. He glanced sidelong at her, smiling silently, methodically adjusted his rifle-strap across his chest, and rode on at a swift trot.

II

That night, close to a small hamlet, a regiment of Red Army men crossed the Don on rafts made of boards and logs.

The Cossack squadron holding the hamlet was taken by surprise, for the majority of them were on a spree. Since early evening their wives had been arriving at the Cossack quarters to visit their husbands. With them they brought food, and home-distilled vodka in pitchers and buckets. By midnight everybody was thoroughly drunk. Songs could be heard coming from the dug-outs, and drunken women's squeals, men's

laughter and whistling.... The twenty Cossacks on picket duty also took part in the drinking bout, leaving two gunners and a bucket of vodka by the machine-gun.

The laden Red Army rafts cast off in complete silence from the right bank of the Don. The men landed on the opposite bank, deployed in line, and silently moved towards the dug-outs, which lay some two hundred paces back from the river.

The military engineers who had built the rafts swiftly rowed back for a new party of Red Army men.

On the left bank, except for the disconnected Cossack singing, not a sound was to be heard for five minutes or so; then hand-grenades began to burst hollowly, a machine-gun stuttered, disorderly rifle-fire at once broke out, and a quivering "Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!" rolled far through the night.

The squadron was overwhelmed, and escaped total annihilation only because pursuit was impossible in the impenetrable darkness.

Suffering only insignificant losses, the Cossacks with their women ran in panicky disorder across the meadows towards Vyeshenskaya. But meantime the rafts had brought fresh parties of Red Army men across from the right bank, and a half company of the First Battalion of the 111th Regiment, equipped with two light machine-guns, was already in action on the flank of the Bazki insurgent squadron.

Further reinforcements streamed into the breach thus formed. But their advance was slow, for none of the Red Army men knew the locality; the units had

no guides, and, moving blindly in the darkness, they continually floundered into ponds and deep torrents of flood water which could not be forded.

The brigade commander directing the attack decided to abandon the pursuit until daybreak, while bringing up reserves and concentrating on the approaches to Vyeshenskaya, and then to order a further advance after artillery preparation.

But at Vyeshenskaya hurried measures were already being taken to close the breach. As soon as a courier galloped up with the news that the Reds had crossed, the officer on duty at staff headquarters sent for Kudinov and Melekhov. The squadrons of the Kargin-skaya Regiment were summoned from the villages of Chorny, Gorokhovka, and Dubrovka. Grigory Melekhov took over the general direction of operations. He threw three hundred sabres against Yerinsky village, with a view to strengthening the left flank and assisting the Tatarsky and Lebyazhy Cossacks to withstand the enemy's pressure should they try to take Vyeshenskaya from the east. Westward, down the Don, he sent the Vyeshenskaya "foreign" volunteers and one of the Chir dismounted squadrons to the aid of the Bazki Squadron; he posted eight machine-guns in the threatened sector and himself, with a couple of mounted squadrons, at about two in the morning took up a position on the fringe of the forest, waiting for the dawn to attack the Reds with cavalry.

The Great Bear had not yet faded when the Vyeshenskaya volunteer detachment, which had made its way through the forest to the Bazki loop of the river, ran into the retreating Bazki men and, taking them

for the enemy, opened fire for a few moments, then fled. The volunteers swam the broad lake separating Vyeshenskaya from the meadowland, in their hurry throwing their boots and clothing down on the edge. The mistake was quickly discovered, but the news that the Reds were approaching Vyeshenskaya had already spread at an astonishing speed. The refugees who had been sheltering in the cellars fled out of the village northward, carrying everywhere the rumour that the Reds had crossed the Don, broken the front, and were advancing on Vyeshenskaya.

Daylight was just glimmering when Grigory, who had been informed of the flight of the volunteers, galloped up to the Don. The volunteers had now realized their mistake and were already returning to the trenches, talking volubly. Grigory rode up to one group and asked sarcastically:

"Were there many drowned when you swam the lake?"

A rifleman, wet through and wringing out his shirt as he walked, answered in a crestfallen tone:

"We swam like pikes. Why should we drown?"

"Everybody makes mistakes," a second, walking in only his pants, spoke up sententiously. "But our troop commander really was nearly drowned. He didn't want to pull his boots off, because he thought it would take too long to unwind his puttees, and so he began to swim, but his puttees came undone in the water. They got tangled round his legs. . . . And the way he bawled! He could have been heard a verst off!"

Finding the volunteers' commander, Grigory ordered him to lead his men to the edge of the forest and to

dispose them so that if necessary they could take the Red lines from the flank, then rode off to his own squadrons.

On the road he was met by a staff orderly. The man reined in his horse, which, judging by its heaving flanks, he had ridden hard, and said with a sigh of relief: "I've had a fine job finding you!"

"Why, what's up?"

"I've been ordered from the staff to inform you that the Tatarsky company has abandoned its trenches. They're afraid of being surrounded and are retreating towards the sandy ground. Kudinov told me himself to tell you to hurry there at once."

Collecting half a troop of Cossacks with the freshest horses, Grigory made his way through the forest on to the road. After some twenty minutes' gallop he was close to the Goly Ilmen lake. To the left of him the panic-stricken Tatarsky men were running in disorder across the meadow. Those who had been at the front, and other, older Cossacks made their way along unhurriedly, keeping close to the lake, taking cover in the river-side rushes; but the majority, evidently dominated by the one desire to get as quickly as possible to the forest, were rushing straight ahead, taking no notice of the occasional bursts of machine-gun fire.

"After them! Give them the whip!" Grigory shouted, his eyes squinting with fury. He was the first to send his horse flying in chase of his own fellow-villagers.

Christonya was jogging along last of all, limping away in a monstrous dancing shamble. While fishing the previous evening he had cut his heel badly on a

reed, so he could not run with the usual speed of his long legs. His whip raised high above his head, Grigory caught up with him. Hearing the sound of horse's hoofs, Christonya looked round and perceptibly increased his speed.

"Where are you running? Stop! Stop, I tell you!" Grigory vainly shouted.

But Christonya had no thought of stopping. He put on a still greater spurt and broke into a queer sort of shambling camel gallop.

Then the infuriated Grigory hoarsely roared a terrible curse, whooped to his horse, and, drawing level, with a feeling of deep satisfaction brought his whip down on Christonya's sweaty back. Christonya took one monstrous side leap rather like a hare's twist, sat down on the ground, and slowly and carefully felt his back.

The Cossacks accompanying Grigory galloped ahead of the fleeing men, halting them, but did not bring their whips into action.

"Flog them. . .! Flog them!" Grigory shouted hoarsely, shaking his ornamented whip. His horse twisted under him, reared and refused to go on. Mastering it with difficulty, he galloped up to the men running in front. As he tore past he momentarily saw Stepan Astakhov halted by a bush, smiling silently; he saw Anikushka double up with laughter and fold his hands into a trumpet, to scream in a piercing, womanish voice: "Brothers! Every man for himself! The Reds! Ah! Seize them!"

Grigory dashed after yet another villager dressed in a padded jerkin, who was running inexhaustibly

and nimbly. The man's round-shouldered figure seemed strangely familiar, but Grigory had no time to decide who it was, and he began to bawl when still some distance behind: "Stop, you son of a bitch! Stop or I'll cut you down!"

Suddenly the man in the padded jerkin slowed down, then halted. He turned round, with a characteristic gesture which Grigory had known ever since his childhood, expressing the highest degree of indignation, and, even before the astonished Grigory caught sight of the man's features, he guessed that it was his father.

Pantelei's cheeks twitched convulsively.

"So your own father's a son of a bitch, is he? So you're threatening to cut down your father, are you?" he shouted in a squeaky falsetto.

His eyes blazed with such a familiar uncontrollable frenzy that Grigory's anger at once died away and, violently reining in his horse, he shouted:

"I didn't recognize your back! What are you bawling for, Dad?"

"What do you mean by 'you didn't recognize me'? Didn't you recognize your own father?"

So absurd and out of place was this demonstration of elderly touchiness that Grigory, laughing, drew level with his father and said in a conciliatory tone:

"Father, don't be mad! You're wearing a coat I've never seen before, and besides, you were flying along like a race-horse, and you weren't even limping. So how was I to recognize you?"

Once more, as in former days, and as always at home, Pantelei calmed down and, still panting violently, but with more control over himself, agreed:

"You're right, the coat's a new one; I exchanged it for the sheepskin—a sheepskin's heavy to carry around. . . . But as for my limp—this is no time for limping! My boy, there's no question of limping here. . . . Death staring us in the face, and here you are chattering away about a game leg. . . ."

"Well, death is still a long way off. Turn back, Father! You haven't thrown your cartridges away, have you?"

"But where are we to turn back to?" the old man protested indignantly.

But at that Grigory raised his voice. Separating every word, he commanded: "I order you to return. Do you know what the regulations prescribe for refusing to obey your commander in the field?"

The words had their effect: Pantelei adjusted the rifle across his shoulder and reluctantly trudged back. As he drew level with one of the old men who was walking along even more slowly, he said with a sigh:

"That's what our sons are like these days! Instead of having respect for his parent, or, as you might say, releasing him from fighting, he tries to get him to go right into it! Ye-es! Now my dead Pyotr, may the Lord have mercy on him, was far better. He was a quiet sort, but this daft one, Grisha, I mean, though he is a divisional commander, and rightly so, and all the rest of it, he's different. He's touchy as a hedgehog! Why, I shouldn't wonder but he'll be prodding me on to the stove in my old age with a boot-maker's needle!"

The Tatarsky Cossacks were made to see reason without any great difficulty. Grigory quickly assem-

bled the entire company and led it under cover. Without dismounting he curtly explained:

"The Reds have crossed the river and are trying to get to Vyeshenskaya. Fighting has started along the Don. It's no joking matter, and I don't advise you to run for nothing. If you run a second time I'll be ordering the cavalry at Yerinsky to cut you down as traitors!" He ran his eyes over the crowd of his fellow-villagers, taking in their motley attire, and ended with undisguised contempt: "You've got a lot of scum collected in your company, and they're spreading panic. Fine fighters you are, running away and making a mess in your trousers...! And you call yourselves Cossacks, too! And you, old men, just you dare! You've said you'll fight, so there's no point in your hiding your heads between your legs now. Now then, in troop order, double across to those bushes and through them to the Don! Then along by the Don to the Semyonovsky Company. When you link up with them, strike at the Reds, taking them in the flank. Quick march! And look sharp!"

The Tatarsky villagers listened in silence and as silently made their way towards the bushes. The old men groaned despondently, looking back at Grigory and his group of Cossacks as they swiftly galloped away. Old Obnizov, who was walking along beside Pantelei, remarked in an admiring tone:

"Aye, but the Lord has deemed you worthy of a hero for a son. A real eagle! The way he brought his whip down on Christonya's back! He brought every man to heel right away!"

Pantelei's fatherly feelings were flattered by Obnizov's remarks, and the old man assented willingly:

"You needn't tell me! You'd have to search a very long way to find another son like him! A whole chestful of medals—that's no joke, is it? Now Pyotr, God rest his soul, he wasn't like that, though he was my own son, and my first-born. He was too quiet, not finished somehow, the plague take him! He'd got a woman's spirit under his shirt. But this other, he's just like me! And he's got even more spirit!"

With his half troop Grigory stole up to the Kalmyk ford. They thought themselves safe when they reached the forest, but they were seen from an observation post on the farther side of the river. A gun-team opened fire. The first shell flew over the tops of the willows and squelched into some marshy hollow without exploding. But the second fell not far from the road among the bared roots of an old black poplar and spurted fire, deafening the Cossacks with its roar and smothering them with clumps of rich earth and crumbs of rotten wood.

Deafened, Grigory instinctively bent forward and raised his arm to shield his eyes as he felt a heavy, wet smack on the horse's crupper.

The explosion shook the ground, and the Cossacks' horses fell back on their haunches and then dashed forwards as though at a command. But Grigory's horse reared heavily under him, fell back, and began slowly to roll over. Grigory hastily jumped out of the saddle and took the horse by the snaffle. Two more shells flew over, then a welcome silence fell on the fringe of

the forest. The smoke of gunpowder settled on the grass; there was a scent of freshly turned earth, of timber chips, of half-rotten wood. Far away in a thicket the magpies chattered anxiously.

Grigory's horse snorted, and its quivering hindlegs began to sag. It bared the yellow line of its teeth tormentedly and craned its neck. A pinkish foam bubbled on its velvety grey muzzle. A violent trembling shook its body, and shudders rolled in great ripples under its bay skin.

"Done for, eh?" a Cossack who galloped up asked in a loud voice. Grigory gazed into the horse's fading eyes without answering. He did not even look at the wound, and only shifted away a little when the horse uncertainly began to hurry forward, drew itself up, and suddenly dropped to its knees, its head hanging, as though asking its master's forgiveness for something. With a hollow groan it rolled on to its side, then tried to raise its head. But evidently it had lost all strength; the trembling gradually died away, its eyes glazed, sweat beaded its neck. Only at the fetlocks, close to the hoofs, was there a last faint pulsation. The worn saddle-flap quivered slightly.

Grigory glanced sidelong at the animal's left groin, noticed a deep open wound with warm black blood gushing like a spring from it, and said, stammering and not wiping away his tears, as the Cossack dismounted:

"Finish him with a single bullet!" He handed the man his own Mauser.

Mounting the Cossack's horse, he galloped to the

spot where he had left his squadrons. He found fighting already going on.

The Red Army troops had renewed the attack at dawn. In the streams of mist their lines rose and silently advanced in the direction of Vyeshenskaya. On the right flank they were held up for a minute by a flooded hollow, then they waded up to their chests through the water, raising their ammunition pouches and rifles high above their heads. A little later four batteries began thundering majestically from the Don-side hills. As the fan-shaped spray of shells swept through the forest, the insurgents opened fire. The Red Army men had now passed from marching to running with their rifles at the trail. The shrapnel burst dryly in the forest, about half a verst ahead of them; the shells splintered trees, sending them crashing to the ground; smoke rose in white clouds. Two Cossack machine-guns rattled away in short bursts. Men began to fall in the first line of Red troops. More and more frequently the bullets picked off men with their rolled greatcoats slung across their bodies and flung them down on their backs or chests; but the others made no attempt to lie down, and the distance separating them from the forest grew shorter and shorter.

In front of the second line a tall, bare-headed commander was running easily, with a long stride, his body bent forward a little, the edges of his greatcoat tucked up. The line slowed down for a second in its advance, but as he ran the commander turned and shouted something, and the men again broke into a run; their hoarse, terrible "Hurrah" again rose in a crescendo of fury.

Then all the Cossack machine-guns began to speak at once, while from the fringes of the forest rifle-shots crackled ceaselessly. From somewhere behind Grigory, who was standing with his squadrons on the road leading out of the forest, the heavy machine-gun of the Bazki Company opened fire in long stutters. The Red lines wavered, then lay down and returned the fire. For perhaps an hour and a half the struggle continued, but the insurgents' fire was so effective that the second line could not face it, and rose and fled back to mix with the third line, which was coming up in a series of short dashes. Soon the meadows were sprinkled with Red Army men running back in disorder. Then Grigory led his squadrons out of the forest at a trot, drew them up in formation, and flung them into the pursuit. The retreating troops were cut off from their rafts by the Chir Squadron, which advanced at a gallop, and a hand-to-hand struggle developed outside the forest, right on the river-bank. Only part of the Red Army men managed to fight their way through to the rafts. They crowded every inch of space on them and cast off. Pressed right down to the river's edge, the others fought back.

Grigory dismounted his squadrons, ordered the Cossacks detailed to the horses not to come out of the forest, and led the others down to the bank. Running from tree to tree, they drew nearer and nearer the river. Some hundred and fifty Red Army men were repulsing the attacking insurgent infantry with hand-grenades and machine-gun fire. The rafts cast off again for the left bank, but the Bazki Cossacks picked off almost all the rowers with rifle-fire. The fate of

the men left on the right bank was sealed. Their morale broken, they threw down their rifles and tried to swim across. The insurgents lay down all along the river-bank and picked them off. Too weak to struggle against the swift current of the river, many of the men were drowned. Only two got across safely. One, wearing a sailor's striped jersey, and obviously a fine swimmer, dived in off the steep bank, went down under water, and came up again almost in the middle of the river.

Taking cover behind a willow with spreading, bared roots, Grigory watched as with great sweeps of his arms the sailor steadily drew nearer to the farther side. One other man also swam across safely. As he stood breast-deep in water he fired all his remaining cartridges, then shouted something, shaking his fist at the Cossacks, and set out to swim on a diagonal course. Around him the bullets sent the water spurning up, but not one hit him. At a watering-place for cattle he waded out of the water, shook himself, and unhurriedly began to make his way up the bank to the yards of the village beyond.

The Reds left on the other side lay down behind a sandy hillock; their machine-gun stuttered away until the water boiled in the water-jacket.

"Follow me!" Grigory quietly ordered as soon as the gun lapsed into silence. Drawing his sabre, he made towards the hillock.

Behind him tramped the Cossacks, breathing heavily.

Not more than a hundred paces separated them from the Red Army men when, after three volleys, a tall, swarthy-faced, black-whiskered commander rose to his

full height from behind the hillock. A woman dressed in a leather jacket was supporting him. The commander was wounded. Dragging his shattered leg, he stepped down from the mound, took a firm grip of his rifle with its fixed bayonet, and hoarsely commanded:

"Comrades! Forward! Smash the Whites!"

Singing the *Internationale*, the little handful of brave men advanced into the counter-attack, advanced to death.

The hundred and sixteen who were the last to fall on the bank of the Don were all Communist members of the International Company.

III

It was late that night when Grigory returned from the staff to his quarters. Prokhor Zykov was waiting for him at the wicket-gate.

"No news of Aksinya?" Grigory asked with forced unconcern in his tones.

"No. She's vanished into thin air," Prokhor answered, yawning, but anxiously thinking: "God forbid that he should force me to go and look for her again! I'm plagued with all the devils!"

"Bring me something to wash with. I'm sweaty all over. Get a move on!" Grigory said irritably.

Prokhor went into the hut for a mug, and for a long time poured water into Grigory's cupped hands. Grigory obviously enjoyed his wash. He drew off his tunic, which stank of sweat, and asked:

"Pour some down my back."

The cold water scorched his sweaty back and made

him grunt and snort; he rubbed his chafed shoulders and hairy chest. Drying himself on a clean horse-cloth, in a more cheerful voice he ordered Prokhor: "They're bringing me a horse in the morning. Take him over, give him a good currying, and then a feed of grain. Don't wake me up, I want to sleep as long as I can. Only disturb me if anyone comes from the staff. Understand?"

He went under the eaves of the shed, lay down in a wagon, and at once dropped off into an untroubled sleep. At dawn he felt cold, tucked up his legs and drew his dew-damp greatcoat around him. But after the sun had risen he again dozed off, and was awakened about seven o'clock by the heavy sound of gun-fire. An aeroplane painted a dull silver was circling in the clear blue sky above the village. Artillery and machine-guns were firing at it from the far side of the river.

"Why, they might hit it!" Prokhor muttered as he zealously curried a high-standing bay stallion tied to a post. "Look, Panteleyevich, look at the devil they've sent you!"

Grigory ran his eyes over the stallion and asked in a satisfied tone:

"How old is he? A five-year-old by the look of him."

"Yes, he's five."

"He's grand! Fine legs under him, and all four stockinged. A handsome fellow! Well, saddle him up, I'm going to see who's arrived."

"Looks fine enough. What will he be like to ride? By all the signs he should have plenty of spirit," Prokhor muttered as he tightened the saddle-girths.

Yet another smoky white puff of shrapnel burst close to the aeroplane.

Choosing a suitable spot for landing, the airman dropped sharply to the ground. Grigory rode through the wicket-gate and galloped to the village stables, beyond which the aeroplane had landed.

The stable formerly used for the village stallions, a long stone building on the outskirts, was packed tightly with over eight hundred Red prisoners. The guards would not allow them out to attend to their needs, and there was not one stool in the place. A thick, heavy smell of human excrement rose like a wall all around the building. Stinking streams of urine were crawling under the door; over them swarmed emerald-green flies.

Day and night muffled groans came from this prison of the condemned. Hundreds of prisoners were dying of exhaustion and the typhus and dysentery which were raging among them. Sometimes the dead were not removed for days on end.

Grigory rode round the stables and was about to dismount when a gun again thundered out from the far side of the Don. The scream of the approaching shell grew louder until it was cut off by the heavy roar of the explosion.

The pilot and the officer who had arrived in the aeroplane were just climbing out of the cockpit; the machine was surrounded by Cossacks. But at that moment all the guns of the battery on the hill spoke at once. The shells began to fall accurately around the stables.

The pilot scrambled back into the cockpit, but the engine refused to start.

"Push it along!" the officer who had travelled with him shouted stentoriously, and was the first to push at one wing. Swaying, the aeroplane moved easily towards a group of pines. The battery accompanied it with a running fire. One of the shells fell right on the crowded stables. One corner crumbled amid clouds of smoke and rising lime dust. The stables shook with the animal roar of the terror-stricken prisoners. Three of them dashed out through the breach, but were riddled at point-blank range by the Cossacks.

Grigory galloped off to one side.

"They'll get you! Ride to the pines!" a Cossack with terrified face and rolling eyes shouted as he ran past.

"They might too! You never know," Grigory thought, and he slowly rode back to his quarters.

That day Kudinov called a strictly secret conference at the staff headquarters and did not invite Grigory to be present. The Don Army officer who had arrived in the aeroplane briefly communicated that any day now the Red front would be broken by the striking force concentrated around Kamenskaya, and that a mounted division of the Don Army, commanded by General Sekretev, would march to link up with the insurgents. The officer proposed that some means of crossing the river should be prepared immediately, so that, after linking up with Sekretev's division, insurgent cavalry regiments could be thrown across to the right bank of the Don. He advised moving the reserve troops closer to the river and, right at the end of the

conference, after the plan for transferring the troops across the river and their further operations had been worked out, he asked:

"But why have you got prisoners in Vyeshenskaya?"

"We've got nowhere else to keep them; there aren't any suitable buildings in the villages outside," one of the staff answered.

The officer carefully wiped his clean-shaven, sweating head with a handkerchief, unbuttoned the collar of his tunic, and said with a sigh: "Send them to Kazanskaya."

Kudinov raised his eyebrows in amazement.

"And then?" he asked.

"And from there—back to Vyeshenskaya," the officer condescendingly explained, screwing up his cold blue eyes. Pressing his lips together, he added harshly: "Really, gentlemen, I don't know why you're standing on ceremony with them. I should have thought the times were hardly suitable at the moment. These scum, who are spreading all kinds of diseases, both physical and social, have got to be exterminated. There's no point in playing the nursemaid with them. That's what I'd do if I were in your place."

The following day the first party of prisoners, numbering two hundred men, was marched out into the sands. Emaciated, deathly pale, hardly able to shift their legs, the Red Army men moved like shades. A mounted convoy closely surrounded the shambling crowd. Some seven versts beyond the village the two hundred prisoners were sabred to the very last man. In the early evening a second party was driven out. The convoy was strictly enjoined only to sabre the

stragglers, and to fire only in the last resort. Of these one hundred and fifty men not more than seventeen reached Kazanskaya. One of the prisoners, a gypsy-looking young Red Army man, went out of his mind. All the way he sang, danced, and wept, pressing a bunch of scented thyme to his chest. Again and again he fell face downwards in the burning sands, the wind played with the dirty rags of his cotton shirt, and then the convoy could see the tightly drawn skin of his bony back and the cracking soles of his feet. They picked him up, splashed water over him from a flack, and he opened his black, maniacally glittering eyes, laughed quietly, and, swaying, went on again.

At one of the hamlets on the road compassionate women surrounded the prisoners, and one majestic and portly old woman said sternly to the man in charge of the convoy:

"You set that dark one free! He's touched, he's drawn nearer to God, and it'll be a great sin for you if you bring such a one to his end."

The head of the convoy, a dashing, red-whiskered cornet, laughed sarcastically:

"We aren't afraid of taking another sin on our souls, old woman. We're too far gone to be made into righteous men!"

"But you set him free, don't refuse me," the old woman insistently asked. "Death is waving its wings over every one of you."

The other women energetically supported her, and the cornet agreed.

"I don't mind; take him. He can't do any harm now.

But as we're so good-hearted you can give us a pipkin of fresh milk for each man."

The old woman led the madman away to her own little hut, fed him, and made up a bed for him in the best room. He slept a whole day through, then awoke, stood with his back to the window, and began to sing quietly. The old woman came into the room, rested her cheek on her palm, stared long and attentively at the youngster's emaciated face, then said in a deep voice:

"They say your people aren't far away. . . ."

The madman was silent for a brief second, then fell to singing again, but more quietly.

The old woman said sternly:

"You stop playing about, my lad, and don't get it into your head that you can fool me. I've lived a lifetime, you can't take me in, I'm no fool! You're quite well in your mind, I know that. . . . I heard you talking in your sleep, and you talked good sense."

The Red Army man went on singing, but more and more quietly. The old woman continued:

"Don't be afraid of me, I don't wish you any harm. I lost two sons in the German war, and my youngest died at Cherkasskoye during this war. I bore them all under my heart. I gave them milk, gave them food, and had no sleep at night when I was young. . . . And so I'm sorry for all the youngsters who serve in the army and fight in the war." She was silent for a few moments.

The Red Army man was silent also. He closed his eyes, and a barely perceptible flush suffused his swarthy cheeks; a blue vein began to pulsate tensely on his thin, scraggy neck.

For a minute he stood in expectant silence, then half opened his black eyes. Their look was intelligent and they gleamed with such impatient expectation that the old woman smiled slightly.

"Do you know the road to Shumilinskaya?" she asked.

"No, Mother," the man answered, hardly moving his lips.

"Then how will you get there?"

"I don't know. . . ."

"That's just the point! Now what am I to do with you?" She waited a long time for him to answer, then asked: "But can you walk?"

"I'll manage somehow."

"These are not the times when you can manage somehow. You have to go by night and walk fast, ah, as fast as you can! Stay here another day, and then I'll give you food, and my little grandson as guide, to show you the road, and—Godspeed! Your Reds are just outside Shumilinskaya, I know that for sure. And you go and get to them. But you can't take the high road, you'll have to strike across the steppe, along the valleys and through the woods, off the roads, or the Cossacks will come upon you and it'll be the worse for you. And that's that, my duck!"

Next day, as soon as dusk fell, the old woman made the sign of the cross over her twelve-year-old grandson and the Red soldier, whom she had fitted out with a Cossack coat, and said sternly:

"Now go, and God be with you! But see you don't fall into the hands of our soldiers. . . . Not on any account, duck, not on any account! Don't bow to me,

but to the Lord God. I'm not the only one, we're all good mothers.... We're sorry for you poor devils, mortally sorry! Now, now, off with you, and the Lord keep you safe!" And she slammed the yellow, clay-daubed, crooked door of her hut.

IV

Every day Ilyinichna awoke at the first gleam of dawn, milked the cow, and started on her housework. She did not light the stove in the house, but made a fire in the outdoor kitchen, prepared dinner, then went back into the house to the children.

Natalya recovered very slowly after her typhus. She first got up from her bed on the second day after Trinity and wandered from one room to another, hardly able to use her emaciated legs. She spent a long time searching through the children's heads, and even tried to wash their bits of clothes while sitting on a stool.

Her emaciated face was continually lit up with a smile, a flush showed rosy on her sunken cheeks, and her eyes, grown large with illness, shone with the kind of radiant, tremulous warmth that follows childbirth.

"Polyushka, my darling! Mishatka didn't upset you at all while I was ill, did he?" she asked in a feeble voice, drawling every word uncertainly, and stroking her daughter's black hair with her hand.

"No, Mummy. Only once Mishatka hit me, but we played together a lot," the girl answered in a whisper, and pressed her face hard against her mother's knees.

"And Granny looked after you?" Natalya continued her questioning, a smile on her face.

"Ever so much!"

"And strangers, Red soldiers, didn't touch you?"

"They killed our little calf, curse them!" Mishatka, who was astonishingly like his father, answered in a deep little voice.

"You mustn't swear, Mishatka. Why, you're talking just like a man! You mustn't ever use bad words about grown-ups," Natalya said reprovingly, suppressing a smile.

"That's how Granny spoke of them, you ask Polya!" little Melekhov glumly justified himself.

"It's true, Mummy, and they killed all our chickens, every one of them!"

Polya grew animated; her little black eyes glittering, she began to tell how the Red soldiers had come into the yard, how they had caught the chickens and ducks, how Granny Ilyinichna had asked them to spare a yellow cock with a frost-bitten comb for breeding purposes, and how a merry Red Army man had answered, swinging the cock in his hand: "This cock, old woman, has crowed against the Soviet regime and so we've sentenced him to death! Whatever you say, we're going to make soup of him, and we'll leave you our old felt boots in exchange."

Throwing out her arms, little Polya added:

"That's how big the felt boots were that they left. Big as big can be they were, and all full of holes."

Laughing and weeping, Natalya caressed the children and, not removing her rapturous eyes from her daughter, joyously whispered:

"Ah, my Grigory's girl! My Grigory's true daughter. You're exactly like your father, down to the last drop of your blood."

"But am I like him?" Mishatka asked jealously, and timidly leaned against his mother.

"Yes, you're like him too. Only, remember: when you grow up you're not to be such a bad lot as your father."

"But is he a bad lot? How is he a bad lot?" Polya asked.

A shade of sorrow fell across Natalya's face. She did not answer, and rose with difficulty from the bench.

Ilyinichna, who was in the room, turned away discontentedly. No longer listening to the children's talk, Natalya stood at the window and gazed at the closed shutters of the Astakhovs' hut, sighing and agitatedly fiddling with the strings of her faded bodice.

Next day she awoke at dawn, rose quietly in order not to disturb the children, washed, and took a clean skirt, a bodice and a white kerchief out of the chest. She was visibly agitated and, by the way she had dressed, by her mournful and forbidding silence, Ilyinichna guessed that her daughter-in-law was going to visit the grave of her grandfather Grishaka.

"Where are you off to?" the old woman asked deliberately, to confirm her conjecture.

"I'm going to visit Grandad," Natalya replied defensively, not raising her head for fear of bursting into tears. She had learned of her grandfather's death, and that Misha Koshevoi had set fire to their house and farmstead.

"You're too weak, you'll never get there."

"I'll manage it if I take rests. You give the children their food, Mamma, for I may be kept there a long time."

"But whatever for, what will you be kept there a long time for? A fine time to go visiting the dead this is, God forgive me! I wouldn't go if I were you, Natalya dear."

"No, I think I'll go." Natalya's face clouded, and she took hold of the door-handle.

"Wait a bit, what are you going there hungry for? Have a bite of something; shall I put out some sour milk for you?"

"No, Mother; Christ have mercy, I don't want it. . . . I'll have something when I get back."

Seeing that her daughter-in-law was resolved to go, Ilyinichna advised her:

"You'd better take the path above the Don, through the gardens. You won't be seen so easily that way."

A coverlet of mist hung over the Don. The sun had not yet risen, but in the east the edge of sky concealed behind the poplars blazed with the livid reflection of the dawn, and a chilling early morning breeze was blowing from below the clouds.

Stepping across the fallen wattle fence with its entanglement of bindweed, Natalya passed into her own orchard. Pressing her hands to her heart, she halted by a fresh little mound of earth.

The orchard was overgrown with nettles and scrub. It smelled of dew-sprinkled burdock, damp earth and mist. On the old apple-tree, which had been charred and killed by the fire, a starling perched with ruffled feathers. The grave mound was settling down. Here

and there among the clods of dry clay the small green spears of upthrusting grass were showing.

Overwhelmed by a rush of memories, Natalya silently dropped to her knees and fell face downward to the ungracious earth, with its everlasting smell of death and decay.

An hour later she stealthily crept out of the orchard and, her heart constricted with pain, looked back for the last time at the spot where once her youth had blossomed. The neglected yard was a mournful sight with the charred beams of the sheds, the blackened ruins of the stoves, and the house foundations. Then she quietly took her way down a side-turning.

With every day Natalya got better. Her legs grew stronger, her shoulders rounded out, her body was flooded with a healthy fullness. Soon she began to assist her mother-in-law in the housework. As they bustled about the stove, they talked for long stretches at a time. One morning Natalya said with a hint of anger in her voice:

"And when will it all end? I'm sick to death of it!"

"You'll see, it won't be long before our people cross the Don again," Ilyinichna confidently answered.

"But how do you know, Mother?"

"My heart feels it."

"So long as our Cossacks are safe and sound! God forbid that any of them should be killed, or wounded.... Grisha's so reckless...." Natalya sighed.

"I don't think anything will happen to them. God isn't without pity. Our old man promised to try to cross and visit us, but I expect he's got put off by

something. If he was to come, you could go back with him to your man. Our villagers are holding positions opposite the village. While you were still lying unconscious I went out at dawn one morning to fetch water from the Don, and I heard Anikushka shouting across the river: 'Greetings, old lady! A greeting from your old man!'"

"But where's Grisha?" Natalya cautiously asked.

"He's in the rear, commanding them all," Ilyinichna answered with simple assurance.

"But where is he commanding them from?"

"It must be from Vyeshenskaya. There's nowhere else he could do it from."

Natalya was silent. Ilyinichna looked across at her and asked anxiously:

"But what's the matter? What are you crying for?"

Natalya did not answer, but pressed her dirty apron to her face and quietly sobbed.

"Don't cry, Natalya my dear, tears won't help now. If God wills, we shall see them again alive and well. You look after yourself; don't go out of the yard unnecessarily, or those Antichrists will see you and start making eyes at you."

It grew darker in the kitchen. Outside, the window was curtained by the figure of a man. Ilyinichna turned to the window and groaned:

"It's them! The Reds! Natalya, darling! Lie down on the bed quick, pretend you're ill.... You never know what sin.... Cover yourself with this sacking."

Trembling with fear, Natalya had hardly dropped on the bed when the latch clattered and a tall Red Army man bent and entered the kitchen. The children

clung to Ilyinichna's skirt. The old woman turned pale. And, where she stood by the stove, there she dropped to the bench, upsetting a pipkin of scalded milk as she did so.

The Red soldier swiftly looked round the kitchen and said in a loud voice:

"Don't be afraid! I shan't eat you! Good-day!"

Natalya, groaning as though she were really ill, drew the sacking over her head; but Mishatka lowered at the visitor and reported in a tone of delight:

"Granny! He's the one who killed our cock. Do you remember?"

The soldier took off his khaki cap, clicked his tongue, and smiled.

"The rascal recognizes me! Fancy remembering that cock? Anyhow, mistress, this is what I've come about: can you bake some bread for us? We've got flour."

"Yes. . . . Of course—I'll bake it. . . ." Ilyinichna stammeringly replied, not looking at the visitor, as she wiped up the spilt milk from the bench.

The soldier sat down by the door, drew his pouch out of his pocket, and rolling himself a cigarette, tried to make conversation.

"Can you get it baked by nightfall?"

"Yes, if you're in a hurry."

"In wartime, Granny, we're always in a hurry. But don't you be upset because of that cock."

"I'm not upset," Ilyinichna replied in alarm. "The child's stupid. He remembers things that are best forgotten."

"All the same, you're a bit of a miser, my boy," the talkative visitor smiled good-naturedly, turning to Mishatka. "What are you staring at me like a little wolf for? Come here and we'll talk to our heart's content about your cock."

"Go to him, silly!" Ilyinichna said in a whisper, pushing her grandson with her knee.

But Mishatka tore himself away from his grandmother's skirt and tried to slip out of the kitchen, edging sideways towards the door. With a long arm the Red Army man drew him to himself, and asked:

"Are you cross with me?"

"No," Mishatka answered in a whisper.

"Well, that's fine! Happiness doesn't depend on a cock. Where's your father? Across the Don?"

"Yes."

"So he's fighting us?"

Encouraged by the man's kindly tones, Mishatka readily informed him:

"He commands all the Cossacks."

"Why, you're fibbing, my boy!"

"You ask Granny, then!"

But his granny only clapped her hands and broke into a groan, completely disconcerted by her grandson's talkativeness.

"Commanding them all?" the puzzled soldier questioned.

"Well, perhaps not all—" Mishatka answered uncertainly, bewildered by his grandmother's desperate glances.

The Red soldier was silent for a moment, then, glancing at Natalya, asked:

"So the young wife is ill, is she?"

"She's got typhus," Ilyinichna answered reluctantly.

Two Red Army men carried a sack of flour into the kitchen, setting it down by the threshold.

"Light your stove, mistress," one of them said. "We'll come for the loaves before evening. But see you bake good bread or it'll be the worse for you."

"I'll bake as well as I know how," Ilyinichna answered, delighted beyond measure that the new arrivals had interrupted the dangerous conversation, and that Mishatka had run out of the room.

Nodding his head at Natalya, one of the men said: "Typhus?"

"Yes."

They talked among themselves in undertones, then left the kitchen. The last of them had hardly turned the corner when rifle-shots rang out from across the Don.

Bending double, the men ran up to the half-ruined stone wall of the enclosure, lay down behind it, and, rattling their rifle-bolts vigorously, began to return the fire.

In a terrible panic Ilyinichna ran out into the yard to look for Mishatka. The men behind the wall called to her:

"Hey, Granny, go into the house! You'll get killed!"

"Our boy's in the yard. Mishatka! Darling!" the old woman called, with tears in her voice.

She ran into the middle of the yard, and at once the firing from the farther bank of the Don broke off. Evidently the Cossacks had seen and recognized her. Mishatka ran up, and the moment she had seized his

hand and entered the kitchen with him, the firing was renewed, continuing until the Red soldiers had left the Melekhov's yard.

Talking in whispers to Natalya, Ilyinichna set the dough to rise. But she did not have to bake the bread.

Towards noon the Red Army men of the machine-gun outposts in the village hurriedly abandoned the yards, and made their way up the slopes to the hill, dragging their machine-guns after them. The company holding the trenches on the hill fell in and went off towards the Hetman's highway at a swinging march.

All at once it seemed a profound silence spread over the Don-side lands. The guns and machine-guns were stilled. Along the roads, over the grass-grown summer tracks, from every village baggage trains and batteries stretched in endless lines to the Hetman's highway; infantry and cavalry marched along in columns.

Gazing through the window, Ilyinichna saw the last Red Army men scramble up the chalky spurs to the hill, wiped her hand on the curtain, and crossed herself with feeling.

"The Lord has brought it to pass, Natalya dear. The Reds are retreating."

"Ah, Mother, they're leaving the village to go to the trenches, and they'll be back again before evening."

"Then what are they running for? Our men have driven them back. They're retreating, the devils! The Antichrists are running...!" Ilyinichna exulted. But she set to work again to knead the dough.

Natalya went out to the porch, stood on the threshold, and, setting her hand to her eyes, gazed long at

the sunlit chalky hill, at the brown, sun-scorched spurs.

In the majestic stillness presaging a thunderstorm the tops of white, rolling clouds rose from beyond the hill. The noonday sun beat down on the earth. The susliks were whistling on the pastureland and their quiet, rather mournful noise mingled weirdly with the joyous singing of the skylarks. So dear to Natalya's heart was the silence which had descended after the gun-fire that she stood motionless listening greedily to the artless singing of the larks, and to the creak of the well-sweep, and to the rustle of the wormwood-scented wind.

It was pungent and scented, that winged easterly steppe wind. It breathed the hot breath of the sun-baked black earth, the intoxicating scents of all the grasses wilting in the sun. But already the approach of rain was to be felt: a fresh humidity was creeping up from the river; almost touching the earth with their double-pointed tails, the swallows were weaving patterns in the air, and far, far off in the deep blue heavens a steppe eagle was winging away from the approaching storm.

Natalya walked through the yard. On the crumpled grass by the stone wall lay golden heaps of cartridge-cases. The windows and whitewashed walls of the house yawned with machine-gun bullet-holes. Seeing Natalya, one of the chickens left alive flew with a squawk on to the roof of the granary.

The gracious silence did not last long over the village. The wind began to blow, unbolted shutters and doors began to slam in the deserted houses. A white

hail-cloud blotted out the sun and floated onward towards the west.

Holding her hair from fluttering in the wind, Natalya went as far as the summer kitchen and again looked in the direction of the hill. On the horizon, wrapped in a lilac smoke of dust, soldiers were galloping along on horses or in two-wheeled army carts.

"So it's true; they're retreating," she decided with a feeling of relief.

Before she entered the house, somewhere far beyond the hill gun-fire began to sound with a rolling, muffled thunder, and, as though exchanging calls with them, the joyous clash of bells from the two Vyeshenskaya churches floated across the river.

On the far side of the Don the Cossacks began to pour in a dense crowd out of the forest, dragging or carrying barges towards the river. They launched them and, standing at the stern, the rowers vigorously worked their oars. Some three dozen boats chased one another hurriedly towards the village.

"Natalya, darling! Oh, my dear... Our folk are coming!" Ilyinichna cried, her eyes streaming with tears, as she ran out of the kitchen.

Natalya seized Mishatka in her arms and raised him high in the air. Her eyes glittered feverishly, but her voice broke as she panted:

"Look, darling, you've got sharp eyes... Maybe your father's among the Cossacks... Can you see him? That isn't him in the first boat, is it? Oh, but you're not looking the right way..."

At the landing place they met only the emaciated Pantelei Prokofyevich. The old man first inquired

whether the bullocks, the farm property, and the grain were all safe, then shed a tear and embraced his grandchildren. But when, hurrying and limping, he went into his own yard, he turned pale, fell to his knees, crossed himself with great sweeps of his arm, and bowing low to the east, for a long time did not raise his grey head from the hot, sun-scorched earth.

On June 10th the cavalry group of the Don Army, commanded by General Sekretev and numbering three thousand men, with six horse-drawn guns and eighteen pack machine-guns, delivered an overwhelming blow and broke through the front close to the district centre of Ust-Belokalitvenskaya. Then the force moved along the railway line in the direction of the district centre of Kazanskaya.

Early in the morning of the third day an officers' reconnaissance patrol from the 9th Don Regiment made contact with an insurgent field outpost close to the Don. Seeing mounted men, the Cossacks rushed for the gullies; but the Cossack captain in charge of the patrol recognized the insurgents by their dress, waved a handkerchief tied to his sabre, and shouted in a ringing voice:

"We're on your side.... Don't run, Cossacks...."

Taking no precautions, the patrol rode to the edge of the gully. The commander of the insurgent outpost, an old, grey-headed sergeant, was the first to come forward, buttoning up his dew-sprinkled greatcoat as

he went. The eight officers dismounted, and the captain went up to the sergeant, removed his khaki cap with its officer's white cockade showing clearly against the band, smiled, and said:

"Well, greetings, Cossacks! As is the good old Cossack custom, we'll kiss each other." He kissed the insurgent on both cheeks, wiped his lips and moustache with his handkerchief, and, feeling his companions' expectant gaze fixed on him, asked with a drawl and a meaning smile:

"Well, so you've come to your senses? So your own folk have proved better than the Bolsheviks?"

"Just so, Your Excellency! We've made up for our sins. Three months we've been fighting; we've been longing to see you."

"A good thing you did think better of it, late though it was. It's all past now, and we'll let bygones be bygones. What district are you from?"

"Kazanskaya, Your Excellency."

"Is your detachment across the Don?"

"Just so."

"Which way did the Reds go from the Don?"

"Up the river; to the Donets settlement, probably."

"Haven't your cavalry crossed yet?"

"By no means."

"Why not?"

"I can't say, Your Excellency. We were the first to be sent over this side."

"Did the Reds have any artillery here?"

"Two batteries."

"When were they withdrawn?"

"During the night."

"They ought to have been pursued. . . . Ah, you let the chance slip!" the captain declared reproachfully and, going up to his horse, took a writing-pad and a map out of his wallet.

The sergeant stood at attention, his hands down his seams. Two paces behind him crowded the Cossacks, with mingled feelings of joy and vague anxiety scrutinizing the officers, the saddles, the thoroughbred but way-worn horses. Dressed in neatly fitting British tunics, with epaulets and broad breeches, the officers shifted from foot to foot, fidgeted around their horses, took sidelong glances at the Cossacks. Not one of them had the home-made epaulets drawn with indelible pencil which had been so common in the autumn of 1918. Their boots, saddles, bandoleers, field-glasses, the carbines clipped to their saddles were all new and all of foreign origin. Only the one who, judging by his looks, was the oldest of them all wore a Circassian coat of fine blue cloth, a round Kuban cap of Bokharan karakul, and mountainer's boots without heels. He was the first to approach the Cossacks; stepping lightly forward, drawing a fine packet of cigarettes adorned with the picture of King Albert of the Belgians from his field case, he suggested:

"Have a smoke, brothers?"

The Cossacks greedily reached out for the cigarettes. The other officers also approached.

"Well, how did you find life under the Bolsheviks?" a cornet with a huge head and broad shoulders asked.

"Not all honey," a Cossack in an old peasant's coat answered cautiously, as he puffed greedily at the cigarette, keeping his eyes fixed on the long gaiters,

laced to the knee, which tightly embraced the officer's sturdy calves.

The Cossack's broken sandals scarcely clung to his feet. His white, well-darned woollen stockings, and the trousers tucked into them, were in ribbons, and so the man could not remove his enraptured gaze from the British-made boots, with their fascinatingly stout soles and brilliantly gleaming brass eyelets. He could not restrain himself and artlessly expressed his admiration.

"But you've got a fine pair of boots!"

The cornet did not feel inclined to enter into friendly conversation. With a sneer and challenge in his voice he said: "You wanted to change your foreign equipment for the Moscow bast sandals, so you've got no reason to envy other people's now!"

"We made a mistake. We got ourselves in the wrong..." the Cossack said in a disconcerted tone, looking round at the other Cossacks in search of support.

The cornet went on sneeringly with his lecture:

"You showed you'd got bullock's brains. A bullock's always like that: he shifts first, and stops to think afterwards. 'Made a mistake!' But when you laid the front bare in the autumn, what were you thinking of then? You wanted to be commissars! Fine defenders of the Fatherland you were!"

"Drop it, that's enough!" a youthful-looking company commander quietly whispered into the fuming cornet's ear. The cornet trod on his cigarette, spat, and swung off to the horses.

The captain handed him a note and said something

in an undertone. With unexpected agility the heavily-built cornet leaped on his horse, turned the animal sharply, and galloped off westward.

The Cossacks maintained a disconcerted silence. The captain came up to them and asked in a ringing, cheery baritone:

"How far is it to the village of Varvarinsky?"

"Thirty-five versts," several of the Cossacks answered in an assortment of voices.

"Good! Well now, Cossacks, go and inform your commander that the cavalry forces are to cross to this side without a moment's delay. One of our officers will go with you to the crossing, and he will lead the cavalry. The infantry can advance on Kazanskaya, in marching order. Understand? Well, as we say, about turn and quick march!"

The Cossacks went in a crowd down the hill. For perhaps two hundred paces they strode along in silence, as though by agreement; but then a homely-looking Cossack in a peasant's coat, the same man whom the hot-tempered cornet had lectured, shook his head and sighed mournfully:

"Well, so we're united again, brothers...."

A second responded readily:

"A horse-radish is no sweeter than a radish!" And he swore juicily.

VI

As soon as the news that the Red forces were in retreat arrived at Vyeshenskaya, Grigory Melekhov and two cavalry regiments swam their horses across

the Don, sent out strong patrols, and moved southward.

Fighting was going on beyond the Don-side hills. They could hear the muffled roar of gunfire thundering as though underground.

"The cadets don't spare their shells, do they! They're putting down a barrage," one of the commanders said in an admiring tone as he rode up to Grigory.

Grigory held his peace. He was riding ahead of the column, gazing about him attentively. For a distance of three versts from the Don to Bazki village thousands of light carts and wagons left behind by the insurgents were strewn along the road. Everywhere in the forest lay scattered possessions: broken chests, chairs, clothing, harness, pots and pans, sewing-machines, sacks of grain, all the things that in their great lust for household property the owners had snatched up and carried so far in the retreat to the Don. In places the road was buried knee-deep in golden wheat. And here and there lay the swollen, stinking carcasses of bullocks and horses, horribly distorted with decay.

"That's how they looked after their property!" Grigory exclaimed, shocked at the sight. Baring his head, trying not to breathe, he cautiously rode round a little mound of fusty grain over which the body of an old man in a Cossack cap and a blood-stained coat was stretched.

"Kept guard over his goods a bit too long, did that old fellow! The devils must have bewitched him into staying here," one of the Cossacks said compassionately.

"Didn't want to leave his wheat behind. . . ."

"Well, trot, can't you! He strinks like God knows what! Hey, get a move on!" came indignant shouts from the ranks in the rear.

The squadron broke into a trot. The talk died away. Only the clatter of innumerable hoofs and the quiet jingle of well-fitting Cossack equipment rang in accord through the forest.

There was fighting going on not far from the Listnitsky's estate. Red Army men were running in close lines along a waterless valley to one side of Yagodnoye. Shrapnel was bursting over their heads, machine-guns were firing at their backs, and a stream of men from a Kalmyk regiment was pouring over the hill to cut off their retreat.

Grigory arrived with his regiments when the battle was over. The two Red Army companies covering the retreat of the shattered forces and baggage trains of the Fourteenth Division were smashed by the Kalmyk regiment and completely destroyed. On the heights above the valley Grigory remarked as he handed over the command to Yermakov: "They've managed here without us. You go and make contact; I'm just going to slip along to that estate for a moment."

"What for?" Yermakov asked in surprise.

"Well, it's a bit hard to say. I worked here when I was a youngster, and something draws me to take a look at the old spots. . . ."

Calling Prokhor, Grigory turned in the direction of Yagodnoye. They had ridden a quarter of a verst when, looking back, he saw a white sheet, which one

of the Cossacks had thoughtfully brought along, fluttering in the wind at the head of the squadrons.

"Looks as though they were surrendering!" Grigory thought anxiously, and he watched with a vague yearning in his heart as slowly, almost it seemed reluctantly, the column dropped into the valley, towards a mounted group of Sekretev men, who were riding at a trot straight across the meadows to meet them.

An air of mournfulness and neglect welcomed Grigory as he rode through the tumble-down gateway into the courtyard. The yard was overgrown with goosefoot. Yagodnoye was unrecognizable. Everywhere he saw signs of terrible neglect and ruin. The once handsome house was dingy and seemed to have sunk on its foundations. The long-unpainted roof was marked with yellow patches of rust, broken gutter pipes hung from the eaves, the shutters were hanging awry, half off their hinges, the wind whistled through the shattered windows, while the sour, mouldy smell of a place long uninhabited came from the rooms.

The eastern corner of the house, together with the porch, had been demolished by a shell from a three-inch gun. The crown of a maple ripped off by the shell was thrust into the broken Venetian window of the corridor. So it had been left lying, its butt buried in a heap of bricks torn up from the foundations. Along its faded branches a vigorous wild hop was already creeping and twining; whimsically overgrowing the panes still left whole, it reached up to the cornice.

Time and weather had done their work. The yard buildings had rotted and looked as though solicitous

human hands had not touched them for many a year. The stone wall of the stable had fallen, washed down by the spring rains; a storm had torn off the roof of the coach-house, and only here and there were handfuls of half-rotten straw left on the bleached rafters and crossbeams.

Three borzois, now completely wild, were lying on the steps of the servants' quarters. Seeing human beings, they jumped up and, barking hoarsely, vanished into the porch. Grigory rode up to the wide-open window of the servants' wing, bent across from his saddle, and called:

"Is there anybody alive here?"

There was a long silence, but at last a woman's strained voice answered:

"Wait a bit, for the love of Christ! I'll be out in a minute."

Shuffling along on bare feet, the aged Lukerya came to the steps. Screwing up her eyes to keep out the sunlight, she stood gazing at Grigory.

"Don't you know me, Aunt Lukerya?" Grigory asked as he dismounted.

Only then did a tremor pass over Lukerya's pock-marked face, and the look of dull indifference gave place to one of terrible agitation. She burst into tears, and for a long time could not utter a word. Grigory tethered his horse, and waited patiently.

"The things I've suffered! God grant that I may never again suffer like it!" Lukerya began to lament, rubbing her cheeks with a dirty canvas apron. "I thought it was them arrived again. . . . Ah, Grisha, the

things that have happened here. You'd never believe! I'm the only one left. . . ."

"Why, where's Grandad Sashka? Did he retreat with the masters?"

"If he had, he might be alive to this day. . . ."

"Surely he's not dead?"

"They killed him. He's been lying in the cellar these past three days. . . . He ought to be buried, but I feel ill. . . . I could hardly get up to answer you just now. . . . And I'm scared to death of going to him, to a corpse. . . ."

"What did they do it for?" Grigory asked thickly, not raising his eyes from the ground.

"It was over the mare. . . . The masters left in a hurry. They only took their money, and they left almost all the property with me." Lukerya's voice dropped to a whisper. "I kept everything, every little thing. It still lies buried to this day. And they only took three Orlov stallions from the horses and left the others with Grandad Sashka. When the rising started, Cossacks and Reds both took horses. The raven stallion Whirlwind—I expect you remember him?—the Reds took him in the spring. They had a struggle to get the saddle on him. You know he'd never been broken in to a saddle. But they never got the better of him. Some Karginskaya Cossacks arrived here a week later and told us about it. On the hill they ran into the Reds and began to fire at them. The Cossacks had got some silly little mare with them, and just at that moment she began to whinny. And Whirlwind flew like wildfire to the mare, and the man riding him couldn't hold him in at all. He saw

he couldn't hold the stallion, and so he tried to jump off while in full gallop. He jumped off all right, but he got his foot stuck in the stirrup. So Whirlwind dragged him right into the hands of the Cossacks."

"Nice work!" Prokhor exclaimed enthusiastically.

"Now a Karginskaya cornet's riding the stallion," Lukerya continued steadily with her story. "He's promised that as soon as Master arrives he'll return Whirlwind to the stable. And so they took away all the horses, and only the trotting-horse Arrow was left. She was in foal, and so nobody touched her. She only dropped the foal recently, and old Sashka took such great care of that little foal, you wouldn't believe! He carried it about in his arms and gave it milk and some herb potion from a horn, to make it stronger on its legs. And then trouble came on us! Three days ago three men rode up late in the afternoon. Sashka was mowing grass in the orchard. 'Come here, you this and that!' they shouted at him. So he threw down his scythe, went over and said good-day to them; but they wouldn't look at him, only drank milk and asked him: 'Have you got any horses?' And he said: 'We've got one, but she's no good for your military work; she's a mare, and she's suckling a foal!' The fiercest of the three shouted: 'That's nothing to do with you! Bring the mare here, you old devil! My horse has got a chafed back, and I've got to change her.' Sashka should have given way and not stood out over the mare, but you know what a character the old man was. . . . There were times when the master himself couldn't make him hold his tongue. I expect you remember."

"And so he didn't hand her over?" Prokhor intervened in the story.

"Why, how could he help handing her over? He only said to them: 'Before you came, we've had I don't know how many horsemen come and take away our horses, but they all had pity on this one, so why should you....' That made them angry. 'You lick-spittle,' they shouted, 'you're keeping her for your master.' Well, and they pulled him away.... One of them led out the mare and began to saddle her, and the foal crawled under her to the teat. Old Sashka began to plead: 'Have pity, don't take her! Where is the foal to go?' 'I'll show you where,' another of them said, and drove the foal away from its mother, slipped his rifle from his shoulder, and fired at it. I burst into tears.... I ran up and pleaded with them, and I got hold of Sashka and tried to lead him out of trouble, but as he looked at the foal his little beard began to shake; he went as white as a wall and said: 'If that's the case, then shoot me, too, you son of a bitch!' He rushed at them and clung to them and wouldn't let them saddle the mare. And they got angry and killed him on the spot. I was near crazed when they fired at him.... And now I can't think what to do about him. He ought to have a coffin made, but is that woman's work?"

"Bring us two spades and some canvas," Grigory said.

"Are you thinking of burying him?" Prokhor inquired.

"Yes."

"A fine idea, taking that on yourself, Grigory Pan-

teleyevich! Let me go and fetch some Cossacks at once. They'll make a coffin and dig him a proper grave...."

It was obvious that Prokhor had no desire to be bothered with the burial of some unknown old man, but Grigory resolutely rejected his suggestion.

"We'll dig the grave and bury him ourselves. Old Sashka was a good sort. Go into the orchard and wait for me by the lake while I go and have a look at him."

Under the same poplar with its roots spreading over the ground, by the weedy pond where Sashka had once buried Grigory and Aksinya's little daughter, the old man found his own last resting-place. They wrapped his withered body in a clean sheet used for covering leaven and smelling of hops, laid it in the grave, and filled in the earth. Beside the infant's mound rose yet another, neatly trodden down by Cossack boots, gleaming cheerfully with fresh, damp clay.

Numbed with memories, Grigory lay down on the grass not far from this tiny, dearly cherished cemetery and gazed long at the majestic expanse of blue sky above him. Somewhere in the heights of that infinite space winds were wandering, and the cold clouds floated in the gleaming sunlight; but on the earth which had just taken Sashka, the merry ostler and drunkard, to itself life was still seething as furiously as ever. From the steppe that crept in a flood of green to the very edge of the orchard, and in the tangle of wild flax around the borders of the ancient threshing-floor, he could hear the incessant pulsating cry of the quails; susliks were whistling, bumble-bees were hum-

ming, the grass rustled under the wind's caresses, the skylarks sang in the spirtling light of the sunset, and, to confirm the grandeur of man's place in nature, from somewhere a long way off down the valley came the persistent angry mutter of a machine-gun.

VII

General Sekretev, who arrived in Vyeshenskaya with his staff officers and a personal escort of a squadron of Cossacks, was welcomed hospitably, with bread and salt, and with the ringing of church bells. The bells of both the churches were rung all day as if it were Easter-time. Cossacks from the lower Don rode through the streets on wiry Don horses emaciated with long marches. Blue epaulets showed challengingly on their shoulders. Close to the merchant's house where the general had taken up his quarters a crowd of orderlies was standing in the square. Husking sunflower seeds, they made conversation with the village girls passing by in their Sunday best.

At midday three mounted Kalmyks brought into Staff Headquarters about fifteen captured Red Army men. Behind them came a two-horse cart loaded with musical instruments. The Red Army men wore an unusual uniform consisting of grey broadcloth trousers and a tunic with red bands on the cuffs. An elderly Kalmyk escort rode up to the orderlies lounging by the gate, dismounted and pushed his clay pipe into his pocket.

"Our men have brought in the Red trumpeters. Understand?"

"What about it?" a fat-faced orderly answered lazily, spitting sunflower husks on to the Kalmyk's dusty boots.

"Well, take them in then. You speak foolishly through your fat face."

"Now then, enough of that, you sheep's tail!" the orderly snapped offensively. But he went off to report the arrival of the prisoners.

A plump, flabby-looking captain in a tight-waisted brown *besmet* emerged from the gates. Planting his feet apart and posing theatrically he ran his eyes over the bunch of Red Army men.

"So you treated the commissars to music, did you, you Tambov raggie-taggle!" he roared. "Where did you get your grey uniforms from? Off the Germans?"

"Not at all," the Red Army man in front of the group answered, blinking rapidly.

"Our band was given this uniform back in Krensky's time, before the June offensive," he explained hastily. "And we've been wearing it ever since..."

"You'll wear it! I'll see you wear it!" The captain pushed his flat-topped Kuban cap on to the back of his head, exposing a raw purple scar on his shaven skull, and rounded on the Kalmyk escort: "What did you bring them here for, you heathen swine? Why the devil couldn't you have finished them off on the road?"

In some imperceptible fashion the Kalmyk braced himself up, brought his heels together and, with his hand held stiffly to the peak of his cap, answered:

"Squadron commander ordered us to drive them here."

"'Us drive them here!'" the dandyish officer mimicked, twisting his thin lips in a sneer, and he stamped off, his heavy hindquarters quivering, to examine the prisoners. He examined them at great length, like a dealer examining a horse.

The orderlies chuckled quietly among themselves. The faces of the Kalmyk escort maintained their usual impassivity.

"Open the gates! Drive them into the yard!" the captain commanded.

The Red Army men and the cart with its untidy heap of instruments halted outside the porch.

"Who's the bandmaster?" asked the captain, lighting a cigarette.

"We haven't got one," several voices answered at once.

"Where is he? Has he run away?"

"No, he was killed."

"And a good riddance! You'll manage without him. Now then, get your instruments ready!"

The Red Army men went to the cart. Timidly the brass voices of the trumpets sounded in the yard, mingling with the incessant clanging of the church bells.

"Are you ready? Play 'God Save the Tsar.'"

The bandsmen looked at one another in silence. No one played. For a minute there was an oppressive silence, then one of them, bare-footed, but with neatly wound puttees, said staring at the ground:

"None of us know the old anthem...."

"None of you?! Very interesting, I must say...."

Hey there, orderlies, half a platoon of you, with rifles!"

The captain beat time inaudibly with the toe of his boot. The orderlies formed up in the corridor, clattering their rifles. Sparrows chirruped in the dense acacia bushes by the fence. The yard was stuffy with the smell of red-hot iron roofs and pungent human sweat. As the captain withdrew into the shade, the barefooted musician glanced hopelessly at his comrades and said quietly:

"Your Excellency! All of us here are young players. We've never had to play the old music. . . . It's been mostly revolutionary marches, Your Excellency!"

The captain fingered the end of his sword-strap absent-mindedly and made no reply.

The half platoon formed up outside the porch and waited for orders. Then one of the bandsmen, an elderly man with a wall-eye, began pushing his way to the front of the group. Clearing his throat, he asked:

"Will you allow me? I can play it." And without waiting for permission, placed his sunbleached flute to his trembling lips.

The wailing mournful sounds that rose solitarily over the spacious merchant's yard brought a wrathful frown to the captain's brow. Waving his arm he shouted:

"Silence! Stop that beggar's whining. . . ! Is that what you call music?"

The smiling faces of staff officers and adjutants appeared at the windows.

"Get them to play a good rousing funeral march!"

a lieutenant shouted youthfully, leaning over the window-sill.

The clangour of the church bells ceased for a minute and the captain, twitching his eyebrows, asked dangerously:

"I hope at any rate that you can play the *Internationale*? Go on, don't be afraid! Go on, I've given the order!"

And in the hush that had fallen on the yard, in the sweltering heat of noonday, the protesting trumpet blasts of the *Internationale* suddenly blared out like a call to battle in majestic unison.

The captain stood with his feet apart, lowering like a bull at a fence. He stood and listened. His muscular neck and the bluish whites of his half-closed eyes became infused with blood.

It was too much for him.

"Stop!" he roared frantically.

The band broke off as one man. Only a French horn was a moment late and for long its passionate strangled blast hung in the torrid air.

The musicians licked their parched lips and wiped them with their sleeves and dirty palms. Their faces were tired and listless. Only one dusty cheek bore the trace of a tear.

Meanwhile General Sekretev had been dining with the family of a fellow-officer who had served with him back in the Russo-Japanese war, and now, supported by his drunken adjutant, staggered out into the square. Bemused by the heat and the vodka, the general stumbled weakly at the corner opposite the brick building of the high school and collapsed face

downwards on the hot sand. The adjutant tried confusedly to lift him, but it was no use. Help came from the crowd that had been standing at a distance. With infinite respect two aged Cossacks raised the general by the arms and the general then proceeded to be publicly sick. But in the intervals between his fits of vomiting he tried to shout something and brandished his fists in warlike fashion. Somehow he was persuaded to retire to his quarters.

The Cossacks standing at a distance watched him go with long stares and whispered to each other:

"Ho, he's under the weather, is our dear Excellency! Can't behave proper, though he is a general."

"Home-brew's got no respect for rank, eh?"

"Aye, there was no need to drink everything they put on the table."

"Not every man can resist it though, brother. There's many a man got himself shameful drunk and sworn never to drink again. Any pig can promise not to eat when there's no food about."

"Yes, that's about it. But give the lads a shout and tell them to keep away. Going along staring at him like that, the rascals, as though they'd never seen a drunk before in their lives."

The church bells were rung and vodka was drunk in Vyeshenskaya until dusk fell. But in the evening the insurgent command organized a banquet for the new arrivals, holding it in the house set aside for the officers' mess.

The tall, well-built Sekretev, a Cossack of Cossacks, a native of one of the villages in the Krasnokutsk District, was passionately fond of riding-horses; he

was a superb rider, and a dashing cavalry general. But he was no speaker. The speech he made at the banquet was filled with drunken bragging and included unequivocal reproaches and threats addressed to the upper Don Cossacks.

Grigory, who was present at the banquet, listened tensely and angrily to Sekretev's words. The general, still not quite sober, stood resting his fingers on the table, sending the fragrant home-brew sprinkling from his glass, giving superfluous emphasis to every phrase.

"... No, it is not we who ought to thank you for help, but you who ought to thank us. You, and only you—that has got to be said plainly. Without us the Reds would have annihilated you. You know that perfectly well. But we would have crushed the scum without you. And we are crushing them, and will continue to crush them, bear that in mind, until we have cleaned up all Russia. In the autumn you abandoned the front. You let the Bolsheviks enter the Cossack lands. You wanted to live at peace with them, but you couldn't! And so you rose, to save your property, your lives. Putting it bluntly, you were afraid for your own and your cattle's hides. I recall the past not in order to reproach you with your sins. I do not say this to you to offend you. But it never does any harm to establish the truth. We have pardoned your betrayal. As brothers, we have come to you in your hour of need, we have come to your help. But your shameful past must be redeemed in the future. You understand, gentlemen? You must redeem it with your exploits and with irreproachable service to our gentle river Don, you understand?"

"Well, here's to the redemption!" an elderly Cossack colonel sitting opposite Grigory said to nobody in particular, smiling almost imperceptibly. Not waiting for the others, he was the first to drink. He had a manly face a little scarred with smallpox, and humorous deep brown eyes. During Sekretev's speech his lips more than once twisted into an indefinite, lurking smile, and then his eyes darkened and seemed jet-black. As he watched this officer, Grigory noticed that he was on familiar terms with Sekretev and behaved very off-handedly towards him, while he was markedly restrained and cold in his relations with the other officers. He alone was wearing khaki epaulets sewn into his khaki tunic, and Kornilov chevrons on his sleeves. "A man with ideals!" Grigory thought. "Probably a volunteer!" The Cossack officer drank like a horse. He did not eat anything, yet he did not get drunk, only let out his broad British belt from time to time.

"Who's that facing me over there—the pock-marked fellow?" Grigory whispered to Bogatiryov, who was sitting next to him.

"The devil knows!" Bogatiryov, who was well on the way to getting drunk, answered vaguely.

Kudinov did not spare the vodka for his guests. Raw spirits appeared on the table, and Sekretev, who had difficulty in finishing his speech, threw open his khaki coat and dropped heavily into his arm-chair. A young squadron commander with an obviously Mongolian type of face leaned across to him and whispered something.

"Go to the devil!" Sekretev answered, turning livid, and he tossed off the glass of spirits Kudinov had obligingly poured out.

"And who's that with the slanting eyes? An adjutant?" Grigory asked Bogatiryov.

Covering his mouth with his palm, his companion answered: "No, that's Sekretev's adopted son. He brought him back as a boy from Manchuria during the Japanese war. He brought him up and sent him to a cadets' military school. And the boy's made good! He's a daring devil! Yesterday he captured the Reds' treasury chests close to Makeyevka. He grabbed two million in notes. Look, you can see packets of them sticking out of all his pockets. The devil struck it lucky! An absolute treasure! But drink up, what are you staring about you for?"

Kudinov made a speech in reply, but hardly anyone listened to him. The carousal grew more and more riotous. Throwing off his jacket, Sekretev sat in his undershirt. His clean-shaven head glittered with sweat, and his irreproachably spotless linen shirt showed up his purple face and almost olive-coloured, sunburnt neck. Kudinov whispered something to him, but Sekretev obstinately repeated without looking at him:

"No, excuse me! But you must excuse me. We trust you, but only in so far as— Your treachery will not quickly be forgotten. Let all those who played about with the Reds in the autumn engrave that on their memories."

"Well, we'll be the same, we'll only serve you so far as—" the intoxicated Grigory thought with cold fury. He rose to his feet.

Not putting on his cap, he went out into the porch and, with a feeling of relief, filled his lungs with the fresh night air.

Down by the Don the frogs were croaking, and the water beetles buzzing gloomily, as before rain. On a spit of sand snipe were calling sadly to one another. Somewhere far away, in the waterside reeds a foal which had lost its mother was neighing in thin, long-drawn-out tones. "Bitter need brought us together, otherwise we wouldn't have wanted so much as a smell of you. The blasted swine! He swells up like a penny piece of gingerbread and reproaches us, and in a week's time he'll start treading on our necks.... What is done is done.... It's all as I thought.... It was bound to be so. But now the Cossacks will turn up their noses! They've got out of the habit of saluting and standing to attention before their Excellencies!" Grigory thought as he went down the steps and groped his way towards the wicket-gate.

The spirits had their effect on him also; his head was swimming, his movements acquired an uncertain heaviness. As he passed through the wicket-gate he reeled, clapped his cap on his head, and, dragging his feet, walked down the street.

Close to the little house belonging to Aksinya's aunt he halted for a moment hesitantly, then resolutely strode towards the door. The inner door leading to the porch was not fastened. He walked into the best room, without knocking, and found himself face to face with Stepan Astakhov, who was sitting at the table. Aksinya's aunt was busy at the stove. The table was covered with a clean table-cloth, and on it stood

an unfinished bottle of home-made vodka and some strips of pink dried fish on a plate.

Stepan had just emptied his glass and evidently was about to have a smoke. But, seeing Grigory, he pushed away his plate and leaned back against the wall.

Though Grigory was drunk, he noticed Stepan's face turn deathly pale and saw his eyes flame wolfishly. Dumbfounded at the meeting, Grigory yet found strength enough to remark hoarsely:

"Good appetite to you!"

"Glory be!" the housewife answered in alarm, undoubtedly fully aware of Grigory's relations with her niece and not expecting any good to come from this chance meeting of husband and lover.

Stepan silently stroked his whiskers with his left hand and kept his burning eyes fixed on Grigory.

But Grigory, standing with feet set wide apart on the threshold, smiled wryly and said:

"Well, I just looked in . . . you must excuse me."

Stepan was silent. The awkward silence lasted until the housewife plucked up courage enough to invite Grigory in.

"Come in and sit down," she said.

Now Grigory had nothing to conceal. His arrival at Aksinya's house was explanation enough for Stepan. And he marched straight into the breach:

"But where's your wife?"

"Have you come to see her, then?" Stepan asked quietly but distinctly, and dropped his fluttering eyelashes over his eyes.

"Yes, that's right," Grigory admitted with a sigh.

He was ready for anything at that moment and,

growing sober, prepared to defend himself. But Stepan half opened his eyes (their previous fire had faded) and said:

"I've sent her for some vodka; she'll be back in a minute. Sit down and wait."

He went so far as to rise, revealing his tall, well-built figure, and he pushed a chair towards Grigory. Not looking at the housewife, he asked:

"Aunt, bring us a clean glass." And to Grigory: "You'll have a drink, won't you?"

"Just one glass."

"Well, sit down."

Grigory sat down at the table. Stepan shared out the rest of the vodka equally in the glasses and raised his strangely misty eyes to Grigory.

"Here's to everybody."

"And their health!"

They clinked glasses together. They drank. They were silent. The housewife, as nimble as a mouse, handed the guest a plate and a fork with a dented handle.

"Have some fish," she said. "It's not very salty."

"Thank you."

"Go on, put some on the plate and enjoy it," the woman, now greatly cheered, urged him. She was pleased beyond expression that all was passing off so well, without a fight, without the smashing of crockery, without shouting. The ominous exchange of remarks had stopped. Husband was sitting peacefully at one table with his wife's lover. Now they were eating silently, not looking at each other. The prudent housewife took a clean hand-towel from the chest and in

a sense united Grigory with Stepan by laying the two ends across their knees.

"Why aren't you with your squadron?" Grigory asked, studying the fish.

"I've come on a visit too," Stepan said after a momentary pause, and from his tone it was quite impossible to tell whether he was serious or sarcastic.

"The whole squadron's back at home, I suppose?"

"They're enjoying themselves in the village. Well, shall we finish our drink?"

"All right."

"Your health!"

"Good luck!"

In the porch the door latch rattled. Now quite sober, Grigory glanced from under his brows at Stepan and noticed that a pallor again washed over his face.

Aksinya entered, her head wrapped in an embroidered kerchief. Not recognizing Grigory, she approached the table and took a side glance at him. Terror spurted in her black, dilated eyes. She panted, then said with an effort:

"Greetings, Grigory Panteleyevich!"

Stepan's great knotted hands, which were resting on the table, began to tremble. Grigory bowed to Aksinya without a word.

Setting two bottles of home-made vodka on the table, she again threw Grigory a glance full of anxiety and secret joy, turned and went into the dark corner of the room, sat down on the chest, and tidied her hair with trembling hands. Mastering his agitation, Stepan unbuttoned his shirt collar, which seemed to

be choking him, filled the glasses to the brim, and turned to his wife.

"Take a glass and sit down at the table."

"I don't want any."

"Come and sit down!"

"But I don't drink vodka, Stepan."

"How many times have I got to tell you?" Stepan's voice shook.

"Sit down, neighbour," Grigory smiled encouragingly. She gave him a pleading glance and swiftly went to the cupboard. A dish fell from the shelf and crashed on the floor.

"Ah, what a pity!" The housewife clapped her hands in chagrin.

Aksinya silently gathered up the fragments.

Stepan filled her glass also to the brim, and once more his eyes flamed with yearning and hatred.

"Well, let's drink—" he began, and was silent.

In the silence Aksinya's violent and spasmodic breathing as she sat down at the table was clearly audible.

"We'll drink, wife, to a long parting. Why, don't you want to? Won't you drink?"

"But you know—"

"I know everything now. . . . Well then, not to any parting. Here's to the health of our dear guest Grigory Panteleyevich."

"Yes, I'll drink his health!" Aksinya said in a ringing voice, and tossed off her glass at one gulp.

"Oh, you stupid hussy!" the housewife muttered, running out into the kitchen.

She huddled into a corner and pressed her hands to her breast, waiting for the table to go flying with a

crash, for a shot to roar deafeningly.... But in the best room the silence was as of the grave. The only sound to be heard was that of the flies, disturbed by the light, buzzing under the ceiling, while outside the window, welcoming midnight, the cocks called to one another across the village.

VIII

Dark are the nights of June on the Don. In the oppressive silence the golden summer lightning flashes over the slaty-black sky, stars fall and are reflected in the flowing swiftness of the river. From the steppe a dry warm wind brings the honeyed perfume of the flowering thyme to the houses, and in the low-lying riverside there is a soft scent of damp grass, of silt, of rawness; the corn-crakes cry unceasingly, and the river-side forest is all covered with a silvery brocade of mist, as in a fairy story.

Prokhor awoke at midnight. He asked the master of the house in which they were quartered:

"Hasn't our man arrived?"

"Not yet. He's enjoying himself with the generals."

"I expect they're having a good time with the vodka there." Prokhor sighed enviously and, yawning, began to dress.

"Where are you off to?"

"I'm going to water the horses and give them some grain. Panteleyevich said we'd be riding to Tatarsky at sunrise. We'll spend the day there, and then we'll have to catch up with our units."

"It's a long time yet to sunrise. Why don't you sleep on a bit?"

In a dissatisfied voice Prokhor answered:

"Anyone with half an eye can see you were never in the army, old man, when you were young. In our service, if we weren't to feed the horses and look after them we might not come through alive. You can't go all out at a gallop on a half-starved little nag, can you? The better the beast under you, the faster you can get away from the enemy. I'm not out to catch them; but if we find ourselves in a tight corner, then I'm the first to show my heels. That's me. I've had my face to the bullets for so many years now I'm fed up with it! Light a light, granfer, or I'll never find my foot-cloths. Thanks! Ye'es, our Grigory Panteleyevich now, he's carried off all the crosses and ranks and dived head-first into hell. But I'm not such a fool, I've got no need of them. Well, here he comes; I expect he's drunk into the bargain."

There was a quiet knock at the door.

"Come in," Prokhor shouted.

A Cossack with the shoulder-straps of a non-commissioned officer on his khaki tunic and wearing a peaked cap with a cockade came in.

"I'm an orderly from General Sekretev's staff. Can I see His Excellency Mr. Melekhov?" he asked, saluting and standing at attention at the door.

"He's not here," Prokhor answered, amazed at the well-trained orderly's bearing and manner of address. "But don't stretch your bones like that! When I was a youngster I was just as foolish as you. I'm his orderly. What do you want him for?"

"I have been commanded by General Sekretev to see Mr. Melekhov. He is requested to present himself at once to the house of the Officers' Mess."

"He went there early in the evening."

"He was there, but later he left and went home."

Prokhor whistled, and winked at the master sitting on the bed.

"Get that, granfer? He slipped away, which means he's gone to his darling. . . . Well, you can go, soldier; I'll find him and send him there right away."

Telling the old man to water the horses and give them grain, Prokhor set off for the house of Aksinya's aunt.

Vyeshenskaya slept in an impenetrable darkness. On the farther side of the Don the nightingales were whistling, vying with one another in the forest. Unhurryingly Prokhor went up to the well-known little hut, entered the passage, and had just taken hold of the door latch when he heard Stepan's deep voice. "Now I'm in a hole," thought Prokhor. "He'll want to know what I've come for. And I'll have nothing to say. Well, it can't be helped. I'll say I came out to buy vodka, and the neighbours sent me to this house."

Plucking up courage, he entered the best room and, struck dumb with astonishment, stood silent with gaping mouth: there was Grigory sitting at the same table as Astakhov and—as though there had never been any quarrel between them—sipping cloudy-green, home-made vodka from a glass.

Stepan, a strained smile on his face, looked at Prokhor and said: "What are you standing there gaping

for and not even saying 'Good-evening'? Have you seen a ghost?"

"Something of the sort," Prokhor, still flabbergasted, answered, shifting from foot to foot.

"Well, don't be afraid, come in and sit down," Stepan invited him.

"Time won't allow of my sitting down. I've come for you, Grigory Panteleyevich. You're ordered to go to General Sekretev at once."

Even before Prokhor's arrival Grigory had started up several times to go. He had pushed away his glass and risen, but had at once sat down again, afraid Stepan would regard his departure as an open manifestation of cowardice. His pride would not allow him to abandon Aksinya, to yield place to Stepan. He drank, but the vodka no longer had any effect on him. Soberly realizing all the equivocal nature of his position, he waited for the outcome. For one second he had felt sure Stepan would strike Aksinya when she drank his, Grigory's, health. But he was wrong. Stepan raised his horny palm, wiped his sunburnt forehead, and after a brief silence glanced in admiration at Aksinya and said: "You're a great lass, wife! I like you for your daring."

Then Prokhor had entered.

After a moment's reflection Grigory decided not to go, thinking he would give Stepan an opportunity to say what was in his mind.

"Go and tell them you haven't been able to find me. Understand?" he turned to Prokhor.

"I understand all right. Only it would be better if you went, Panteleyevich."

"That's not your business. Off with you!"

Prokhor went towards the door. But at that moment Aksinya unexpectedly intervened. Not looking at Grigory she said dryly:

"But what does this mean? You had better go with him, Grigory Panteleyevich! Thank you for coming and being our guest, spending some of your time with us. . . . But it's getting late, the second cock has crowed. It'll be dawn soon, and Stepan and I have got to go home at sunrise. . . . And besides, you've had enough drink! No more!"

Stepan did not try to keep him back, and Grigory rose. As they shook hands Stepan held Grigory's in his own cold, rough hand, as though at last he wanted to say something. Yet even then he did not speak, but silently watched Grigory to the door, then unhurriedly reached out for the unfinished bottle.

The moment Grigory found himself in the street a terrible weariness took possession of him. Moving his legs with difficulty, he walked as far as the first cross-roads, then asked Prokhor, who was following close behind him:

"Go and saddle the horses and bring them here. I shan't get there on foot. . . ."

"Shall I go and report that you're on the way?"

"No."

"Well, wait a bit; I'll be back in a moment."

This time the always leisurely Prokhor set off for their quarters at a trot.

Grigory sat down by the fence and lit a cigarette. As he mentally reviewed his meeting with Stepan, he unconcernedly thought: "Well, now he knows. So

long as he doesn't beat Aksinya." Then his weariness and the emotional excitement he had experienced forced him to lie down. He dozed off.

Prokhor rode up very soon after.

They crossed by the ferry to the farther side of the Don and put the horses into a swinging trot.

They rode into Tatarsky at dawn. By the gate of his yard Grigory dismounted, threw the rein to Prokhor, and hurrying, agitated, went towards the house.

Natalya, half dressed, happened to come out to the porch for something. At the sight of Grigory her sleepy eyes blazed up with such a bright, spurting light of joy that his heart beat and his eyes momentarily, unexpectedly moistened, Natalya silently embraced her beloved, pressing all her body against his, and by the way her shoulders quivered Grigory realized that she was weeping.

He went into the house, kissed the old people and the children sleeping in the best room, and stood in the middle of the kitchen.

"Well, how did you come through? All well?" he asked, breathing heavily with agitation.

"Glory be, my son, we've seen things to put fear into our hearts, but we can't say we've been overmuch troubled," Ilyinichna hurriedly answered. Glancing sidelong at the tearful Natalya, she shouted at her harshly: "You ought to be glad, and you're crying, you little fool! Now, don't stand there doing nothing! Get some wood, light the stove."

While she and Natalya were hastily getting breakfast ready, Pantelei Prokofyevich brought his son a clean hand-towel and suggested:

"You have a wash, I'll pour the water for you. It freshens up the head. You stink of vodka. I suppose you were celebrating the joyful event yesterday?"

"We celebrated right enough. Only at the moment it isn't clear whether it's a joyful or a mournful event."

"What's that?" the old man was surprised beyond measure.

"Why, Sekretev's rather angry with us."

"Well, that's no great woe. Surely he didn't drink with you too?"

"M'yes, he did."

"Did he indeed! The honour you've been done, Grisha! Sitting at the same table as a real general! To think of it!" Giving his son a tender look, Pantelei clicked his tongue in delight.

Grigory smiled. He did not share his father's naïve exultation in the least.

As he seriously questioned the old man about the cattle and property and asked how much grain had been spoilt, Grigory noticed that his father was not so interested as of old in talking about the farm. Something more important was weighing on the old man's mind, something was oppressing him.

Pantelei was not slow in giving expression to his fears. "What's going to happen now, Grisha? Surely we shan't have to serve any more?"

"Who won't?"

"The old men. Me, for instance."

"No one knows yet."

"So we shall have to go?"

"You can stay."

"But really?" Pantelei exclaimed in delight, and went limping about the kitchen in his agitation.

"Sit down, you lame devil! Don't carry the dirt on your boots all over the house. You're so overjoyed you're running about like a mad dog," Ilyinichna snapped at him sternly.

But the old man paid no attention to her shout. He hobbled several times from the table to the stove, smiling and rubbing his hands. Then he was seized by doubts:

"But can you give me my discharge?"

"Of course I can."

"You'll write me out a document?"

"Of course."

The old man stammered irresolutely, but at last got out the words:

"What sort of document will it be? . . . Without a seal? Or mebbe you've got a seal with you?"

"It'll do all right without a seal," Grigory smiled.

"Well, then there's no point in talking." The old man again cheered up. "God grant you health! When are you thinking of going off again?"

"Tomorrow."

"Have your forces gone on ahead?"

"Yes. But don't you worry about yourself, Father. In any case all the old men like you will be allowed to go home soon. You've served your time."

"God grant it!" Pantelei crossed himself, evidently now completely reassured.

The children woke up. Grigory took them in his arms, seated them on his knees, and, kissing them in

turn, a smile on his lips, listened long to their merry chatter.

How the hair of these children was scented! With sun, with grass, with warm pillows, and with something else infinitely close and dear to him. And they—this flesh of his flesh—were like the tiny steppe birds. How clumsy his great black hands seemed as they embraced the two children! And how foreign to this peaceful scene did he seem—this horseman who had slipped from his horse for one day, who was soaked through and through with the pungent scent of soldiering and horse's sweat, the sour smell of campaigning and of leather equipment!

Grigory's eyes were filmed with a mist of tears, his lips quivered under his whiskers. Three times he failed to answer his father's questions, and he came to the table only when Natalya touched him on the sleeve of his tunic.

Truly, Grigory was no longer the man he had been! He had never been particularly sensitive and had wept rarely even as a child. But now these tears, these muffled, hurried beats of his heart and the feeling as though a little bell were tolling noiselessly in his throat. . . . For that matter, it may all have been because he had drunk a great deal the previous night and had had no sleep.

Darya returned from driving the cows out to the pasture. She put her smiling lips up to Grigory, and when, after jocularly stroking his whiskers, he brought his face close to hers, she closed her eyes. He saw her lashes quivering as though in the wind, and for a

moment he was conscious of the fusty scent of cream coming from her unfading cheeks.

So Darya was the same as ever. It would seem that no sorrow could ever be strong enough even to bow her to the ground, far less to break her. She lived in the world like a switch of purple willow: flexible, beautiful, and not hard to come by.

"Still blooming?" Grigory asked.

"Like the roadside henbane," Darya smiled dazzlingly, half closing her radiant eyes. She at once went over to the mirror to adjust the hair which had broken free of her kerchief and to smarten herself up.

But she had always been like that, had Darya. There was nothing to be done with such a woman, surely. Pyotr's death had had the effect of spurring her on and, as soon as she had recovered from the blow, she had grown still more greedy of life, still more attentive to her appearance.

They awoke Dunya, who was sleeping in the granary. After crossing themselves, all the family sat down at the table.

"Oh, but you've grown old, Brother!" Dunya said commiseratingly. "You've gone as grey as a wolf."

Grigory gave her a silent, unsmiling look across the table and only then said:

"So I should. It's for me to grow old, and it's for you to come of age, to look for a husband. . . . But I tell you this: from today on you're to forget even to think about Misha Koshevoi. If from today on I hear that you're pining for him I'll step on one of your feet, and I'll take hold of the other, and I'll rip you in two like a little frog. Understand?"

Dunya flamed up like a carrot and gazed at Grigory through her tears.

He did not turn his angry eyes away from her face, and in all his harsh features, in the teeth bared under his moustache, in his narrowed eyes, the innate Melekhov, animal traits emerged still more clearly.

But Dunya also was of the same breed. Recovering from her embarrassment and shame, she quietly but resolutely said:

"Don't you know, Brother? You can't command the heart."

"The heart that does not obey you has to be torn out," Grigory advised her coldly.

"It's not for you to talk like that, my son," Ilyinichna thought. But at that point Pantelei Prokofyevich joined in the conversation. He banged his fist down on the table and roared:

"Hold your tongue, you daughter of a bitch! Or I'll give you such a hiding that you won't have a hair left on your head! You hussy! I'll go this minute and get some reins. . . ."

"But, Father, we haven't got one pair of reins left. They've all been taken," Darya interrupted him, a meek look on her face.

Pantelei shot a furious glance at her and, not lowering his voice, continued to unburden his soul:

"I'll get a saddle-girth, and I'll drive all the devils out of you. . . ."

"The Reds have taken the saddle-girths too," Darya intervened, this time in a louder voice, but still gazing at her father-in-law with innocent eyes.

But that was too much for Pantelei. He stared at his daughter-in-law for a second, turning livid with dumb fury, his mouth silently gaping (at that moment he looked like a pike hauled out of the water), then hoarsely shouted: "Shut up, damn you; may a hundred devils take you! They won't let me say a word. What do you call this? But you, Dunya, understand this. It'll never happen. I speak to you as your father. And Grigory was right. If you go on thinking of such a scoundrel, killing will be too good for you. A fine wooer she's found! A gallows-bird has captured her soul! Is that what you call a man? Do you think I'd have such a Judas as my son-in-law? If he ever falls into my hands, I'll put him to death myself. Only give me one more back-answer, and I'll get a willow switch and I'll give you. . . ."

"Why, you could look all over our yard with a light in broad daylight and you'd never find a willow switch," Ilyinichna said with a sigh. "You can scrape out every corner of the yard and you won't find so much as a twig to light a fire with. That's what we've come to!"

Even in this artless remark Pantelei detected an evil intent. He looked fixedly at the old woman, then jumped up like a madman and ran out into the yard.

Grigory threw down his spoon, covered his face with his hand-towel, and shook with soundless laughter. His anger had passed, and he laughed as he had laughed in days long past. They all laughed except Dunya. Now a more cheery note reigned at the table. But the moment Pantelei was heard stamping up the

steps of the porch all their faces grew serious. The old man burst in like a hurricane, dragging a very long alder bough behind him.

"There you are! It'll be enough for all the lot of you, damned long-tongues! You long-tailed vixens! There aren't any switches? Then what's this? And you'll get a taste of it too, you old she-devil! You'll get a taste of it. . . ."

The branch was too big for him to get it into the kitchen, and after tipping a pot over, the old man threw it down with a crash in the passage, then, breathing heavily, sat down at the table.

He was obviously quite upset. He wheezed, and ate without speaking. The others were silent also. Darya did not raise her eyes from the table, for fear of bursting into laughter. Ilyinichna sighed and whispered almost inaudibly: "O Lord, Lord! Heavy and grievous are our sins!" Only Dunya did not feel like smiling, and Natalya, who while the old man was outside had smiled a queer, laboured smile, again grew abstracted and sorrowful.

"Pass the salt! The bread!" Pantelei occasionally bellowed menacingly, sweeping his glittering eyes over his family.

The family quarrel ended in a decidedly unusual fashion. In the general silence Mishatka gave his grandfather fresh cause for offence. He had often heard his grandmother call his grandfather all kinds of names when they were quarrelling, and, childishly upset because his grandfather was talking of thrashing everybody and shouting the house down, he suddenly remarked in a ringing voice, his nostrils quivering.

"The way you carry on, you lame devil! You need a stick about your head, to make you stop frightening me and Granny."

"Did you say that to me—to your grandfather?"

"Yes, to you!" Mishatka declared valiantly.

"But how dare you use such words to your own grandfather?"

"Well, what are you making all that noise for?"

"What a little devil!" Stroking his beard, Pantelei ran his eyes in amazement around the room. "And he's picked up all that talk from you, you old hag! It's you who teaches him!"

"Who teaches him? He's just as uncontrollable as you and his father," Ilyinichna angrily defended herself.

Natalya rose and spanked Mishatka, instructing him the while: "You're not to talk to your grandad like that! Do you hear?"

Mishatka began to bellow and buried his face in Grigory's lap. But Pantelei, who loved his grandchildren with all his heart, jumped up from the table and, with tears streaming from his eyes, and not even bothering to wipe away the tears running down over his beard, joyously shouted:

"Grisha! My son! Well, I'll be damned! The old woman said truly. It's ours all right! It's the Melekhov blood! That's when the blood shows. No one can keep him quiet! Little grandson! My darling! Here, beat the old fool with whatever you like. Drag him about by his beard!" Snatching Mishatka away from Grigory, the old man lifted the boy high above his head.

They finished breakfast and rose from the table. The women began to wash up, but Pantelei lit a cigarette and said to Grigory:

"It's a bit awkward to ask you, for you're only here on a visit, but what else can I do? Give me a hand with setting up the fence and barring off the threshing-floor, for everything's fallen down, and you can't ask strangers just now. They're all in the same state."

Grigory willingly agreed, and the two of them worked in the yard until dinner-time, putting the fencing in order.

As they drove in a piling together, the old man said:

"It's time to mow, but I don't know whether to buy some grass or not. What do you think in regard to the farm? Is it worth the bother? In a month's time the Reds may be calling on us again, and everything will go to those devils once more."

"I don't know, Father," Grigory frankly admitted. "I don't know what turn events may take and who's going to win. Carry on so that you've got nothing to spare either in the bins or in the yard. At such times as these it's all for nothing. Take my father-in-law, for instance. He toiled away all his life, he made money, he sweated the blood out of himself and out of others, and what is left of it all? Only charred stumps in the yard."

"That's just what I was thinking, lad," the old man agreed, suppressing a sigh.

He made no further attempt to talk about the farm. Only, just after noonday, noticing that Grigory was taking extra pains over fixing up the gate to the

threshing-floor, he said in a chagrined and openly bitter tone:

"Just do it anyhow! What are you taking all that trouble for? It hasn't got to stand for a lifetime."

Only now, it seemed, did the old man realize all the futility of his efforts to organize his life along the old lines.

Just before sunset Grigory stopped work and went into the house. Natalya was alone in the best room. She had dressed herself up as though for a holiday. Her dark-blue woollen skirt and light-blue poplin jacket with embroidery at the breast and with lace cuffs fitted her neatly. Her face was tenderly rosy and shone a little from the soap she had washed with. She was looking for something in the chest, but when she saw Grigory she dropped the lid and straightened up with a smile.

Grigory sat down on the chest and said: "Sit down a while, for I'm off tomorrow and we shan't have had any talk together."

She humbly sat down at his side, looking at him sidelong with eyes a little startled. But he unexpectedly took her hand and said in a caressing tone: "But you're as smooth as if you'd never been ill."

"I've got over it. . . . We women are hardy as cats," she said, timidly smiling and bowing her head.

Grigory noticed the tenderly rosy, fluffy lobe of her ear and the yellowish skin at the nape of her neck through the strands of her hair and asked: "Is your hair falling out?"

"It's almost all out. I'm moulting all over, I shall be bald soon."

"Let me shave your head," he suggested suddenly.

"What!" she exclaimed in alarm. "But then what will I look like?"

"It's best to shave, or the hair won't grow again."

"Mamma promised to cut my hair with scissors," Natalya said, smiling in her embarrassment, and she dextrously threw a snow-white, heavily blued kerchief over her head.

She, his wife and the mother of Mishatka and Polyushka, was at his side. For him she had decked herself out and had washed her face. In the kerchief she had hurriedly donned so that he should not see how unsightly her hair had become since her illness, sitting there with her head bent slightly to one side, she looked so pitiful, so uncomely, and yet so beautiful, radiant with some pure, intrinsic beauty. She always wore high collars, to hide from him the scar which disfigured her neck. It was all done for his sake. . . . A tremendous flood of tenderness swept over Grigory's heart. He wanted to say something warm and kindly to her, but he could not find the words and, silently drawing her to himself, he kissed her white, lofty brow and mournful eyes.

Never before had he spoiled her with caresses. All her life Aksinya had stood in her path. Moved by her husband's display of feeling, burning with agitation, she took his hand and raised it to her lips.

For a minute they sat without speaking. The western sun threw livid rays into the room. The children were playing on the steps. As they sat they heard Darya take the well-baked pipkins out of the oven and say discontentedly to her mother-in-law: "Couldn't

you even milk the cows every day? The old one seems to be yielding less milk."

The herd returned from the pasture. The cows lowed, the lads cracked the hairy lashes of their whips. From time to time the village bull bellowed hoarsely. His silky chest and steep, moulded back were bitten to blood by gadflies. The bull shook his head angrily; tearing up the Astakhovs' wattle fencing on his short, wide-set horns as he went along, he flung it down and trampled across it. Natalya looked out of the window and said:

"You know, the bull retreated across the Don as well. Mother said that as soon as firing began in the village he got out of his stall and swam straight across the river and hid in the reeds on the other side the whole time."

Grigory was silent, lost in thought. Why had she got such mournful eyes? And something secretive, elusive, kept appearing and disappearing in them. Even in her joy she was sorrowful and somehow beyond his understanding.... Perhaps she had heard rumours of his visits to Aksinya in Vyeshenskaya? At last he asked: "Why are you so downcast today? What's weighing on your heart, Natalya? You might tell me, won't you?"

He expected tears, reproaches. But Natalya answered in a frightened tone: "No, no, it only seems so to you. I'm all right. I'm all right.... It's true I'm not quite well again yet. My head swims, and if I bend or pick something up everything goes dark before my eyes."

Grigory gazed at her curiously and again asked:

"You've been all right here without me? Nobody interfered with you?"

"No; what are you saying? I've been lying ill the whole time." She gazed right into his eyes and even smiled very faintly. After a silence, she asked: "Are you leaving early tomorrow?"

"At dawn."

"But can't you spend another day here?" An uncertain, timid hope sounded in her voice.

He shook his head, and she said with a sigh:

"How will it be now—have you got to wear epaulets?"

"I shall have to."

"Well then, take off your tunic and I'll sew them on while it's still light."

With a grunt Grigory drew off his tunic. It was still damp with his sweat. Wherever his military straps had rubbed the cloth, shiny spots showed wet on the back and shoulders. Natalya took a pair of faded khaki epaulets out of the chest and asked:

"Are these the ones?"

"Yes. So you kept them?"

"We buried the chest," Natalya said indistinctly as she pushed the thread through the needle-eye. Stealthily she raised the dusty tunic to her face and avidly sniffed at the salty scent of his sweat which was so dear to her.

"What did you do that for?" Grigory asked in astonishment.

"It smells of you," she said, her eyes glittering. She bent her head to hide the sudden flush in her cheeks and skilfully began to sew.

Grigory put on his tunic. His face clouded and he shrugged his shoulders.

"You look better with them on!" Natalya said, gazing at her husband in open admiration.

But he squinted round at his left shoulder and sighed: "I wouldn't mind if I never saw them again! You just don't understand a thing!"

They remained sitting a long time on the chest in the best room, holding each other's hand, silently thinking their own thoughts.

When dusk began to fall and the heavy lilac shadows of the buildings extended over the cooling earth, they went into the kitchen for supper.

And so the night passed. Until sunrise the summer lightning flickered in the sky, until the white day-break the nightingales in the cherry orchard filled the night with tumult. Grigory woke up and lay with closed eyes, listening to the sweet juggling of the nightingales, then he rose, quietly, trying not to disturb Natalya, dressed, and went out into the yard.

Pantelei Prokofyevich had fed Grigory's horse, and with a soldier's forethought he suggested: "Shall I get on his back and give him a bath before you start?"

"He can manage without it," Grigory said, bristling with the early morning rawness.

"Did you sleep well?" his father asked.

"Too well! But the nightingales woke me up! It's the limit the way they carried on all night!"

Pantelei took the nose-bag from the horse, and smiled.

"They've got nothing else to do, lad. There's times

when you feel envious of those divine birds. They know nothing about war or ruin. . . .”

Prokhor rode up to the gate. His face was clean-shaven and, as usual, he was cheerful and talkative. Fastening his horse's leading ring to a post, he came up to Grigory. His canvas shirt had been ironed smooth. On his shoulders were new-looking epaulets.

“So you've put epaulets on too, Grigory Panteleyevich?” he shouted as he came up. “They've been waiting for us, damn them! Now we may wear them, but we'll never wear them out. They'll last out our time. I said to my wife: ‘Don't sew them on so they'll never come off, you fool! Just tack them on so that the wind can't bellow them away, and that'll be all right.’ You know the state of our affairs. If we get taken prisoner they'll see at once that even though I'm not an officer, I'm a senior non-com. Aha, they'll say, you knew how to get yourself promoted, now learn how to hold your head for the noose! Do you see how they're hanging on me? It's just comic!”

Prokhor's epaulets had certainly been tacked on as loosely as possible and they hardly remained in position.

Pantelei burst into a roar of laughter. Untouched by time, his white teeth gleamed amid his grizzled beard.

“There's a soldier for you! So if there's the least sign of anything happening you'll be pulling them off?”

“What d'you think?” Prokhor laughed.

Smiling, Grigory said to his father:

“You see what a fine orderly I've managed to get

hold of? Even if I get into trouble, I'll be all right with him around."

"That's all very well, Grigory Panteleyevich, but you know how it is—you die today, and I die tomorrow," Prokhor said to justify himself. He tore off his epaulets with the greatest ease and carelessly thrust them into his pocket, remarking: "When we get near the front I can sew them on again."

Grigory ate a hurried breakfast, then took leave of his family.

"May the Queen of Heaven preserve you!" Ilyinichna whispered fervently as she kissed her son. "You're the only one we've got left. . . ."

"Now, no tears for a long journey! Good-bye!" Grigory said in a quivering voice, and went across to his horse.

Throwing Ilyinichna's black three-cornered kerchief over her head, Natalya went out beyond the gate. The children clung to her skirt. Polyushka sobbed disconsolately. Choking back her tears, she begged her mother: "Don't let him go! Don't let him go, Mummy! He'll be killed in the war. Daddy, don't ride off to the war!"

Mishatka's lips quivered, but he did not cry. He manfully restrained himself and angrily told his little sister: "Don't cackle, you goose! Everybody isn't killed in the war!"

He firmly remembered his grandfather's words that Cossacks never cry, that it was a terrible shame for Cossacks to cry. But when his father, seated on his horse, raised him to the saddle and kissed him, he noticed with amazement that his father's eye-lashes

were wet. And then Mishatka could stand the test no longer. Tears poured like rain from his eyes. He hid his face against his father's chest, against the leather straps, and bellowed: "Let Grandad go and fight! We don't need him around...! I don't want you to..."

Grigory carefully lowered his son to the ground, wiped the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand, and silently touched up his horse.

How many times now had his charger wheeled the earth by the steps of his home as it galloped away! How many times had it carried him along the tracks and over the roadless steppe to the front, to where gloomy death marked down the Cossacks, to where, in the words of the Cossack song, there was "fear and sorrow every day, every hour"! But never had he ridden out of his village with so heavy a heart as on that gracious morning.

Burdened with vague presentiments, which weighed him down with anxiety and foreboding, he rode with the reins over his saddle-bow as far as the hill-crest before he looked back. At the fork, where the dusty road branched off towards the windmill, he turned his head. Only Natalya was standing at the gate, and the fresh, early morning breeze was tearing her black, mourning kerchief from her hands.

Whipped into foam by the wind, the clouds floated on and on in the blue, still pool of the sky. A haze quivered on the wavy rim of the horizon. The horses moved at a walking pace. Prokhor dozed, swaying in the saddle; Grigory, clenching his teeth, looked back again and again. For some time he could see the green

clumps of willows, the silvery, capriciously winding ribbon of the Don, the slowly turning sails of the windmill. Then the track curved sharply southward. The sedgy river-side, the Don, the windmill vanished behind the trampled fields of grain. . . . He began to whistle something, fixedly gazed at his horse's golden-brown neck with its fine beading of sweat, and turned no more in his saddle. . . . To hell with it, with this war! Fighting had gone on along the Chir, then it had raged along the Don, and now it would thunder over the Khoper, over the Medveditsa, over the Buzuluk. After all, he thought, what did it matter where an enemy bullet sent him to the ground?

IX

Fighting was going on around the district centre of Ust-Medveditskaya. Grigory first caught the muffled sound of gun-fire as he turned off the summer track on to the Hetman's high road.

All along the high road the traces of the Red forces' hurried retreat were visible. He came across numerous abandoned two-wheeled carts and britzkas. In a ravine beyond a hamlet stood a gun with its axle shattered by a shell and its barrel twisted. The traces to the swingle-tree of the limber had been slashed obliquely. In the salt-marshes half a verst from the ravine, the bodies of soldiers in khaki shirts and trousers, with puttees and heavy, iron-shod boots, lay thickly on the stunted, sun-scorched grass. They were Red Army men who had been overtaken and sabred by the Cossack cavalry.

As Grigory rode past he could easily tell this from the blood dried copiously on the shrivelled shirts and by the position of the bodies. They lay like scythed grass. The Cossacks had not stripped their clothing off them, probably because of the necessity of continuing the pursuit.

A Cossack was lying close to a bush of hawthorn. The red stripes showed rustily on his wide-flung legs. A little way off lay a light bay horse, saddled with an old and battered saddle, the pommels painted with ochre.

Grigory's and Prokhor's horses were growing tired. It was time they had a feed, but Grigory did not feel like halting in a spot where fighting had recently taken place. He rode on nearly a verst, dropped down into a gully and reined in his horse. A little way off he could see a pond with a dam washed away down to the foundations. Prokhor rode towards the crumbling and cracking edges of the pond, but suddenly turned back.

"What's the matter?" Grigory asked.

"Ride closer and look!"

Grigory rode his horse towards the dam. A dead woman was lying in the mud. Her face was covered with the lower edge of her dark skirt. Her full white legs, with sunburnt calves and dimpled at the knees, were straddled shamelessly and horribly. Her left arm was twisted behind her back.

Grigory hurriedly dismounted, took off his cap, stooped, and pulled the dead woman's skirt down over her body. Her youthful, swarthy face was handsome even in death. Under her painfully knitted brows

the half-closed eyes gleamed faintly. In the grin of her softly outlined mouth the clenched, close teeth shone like mother-of-pearl. A fine strand of hair hung over the cheek pressed to the grass. And over this cheek, which death was already tingeing with fugitive, saffron-yellow shades, the busy ants were crawling.

"The beauty those sons of bitches have destroyed!" Prokhor said in an undertone. He was silent for a good minute, then he spat fiercely. "I'd put such—such clever scum against a wall! Let's get on, for Christ's sake! I can't stand looking at her. It makes my heart turn over."

"Don't you think we might bury her?" Grigory asked.

"Why, have we got to bury all the dead we come across?" Prokhor objected. "We buried some old gaffer at Yagodnoye, and now there's this woman.... If we're going to bury them all, we shan't have enough corns on our hands! And what are we going to dig a grave with? You can't do it with a sword, brother; the earth's baked hard with the heat for a good two feet down."

He was in such a hurry to get away that he could hardly get the toe of his boot in the stirrup.

Once more they rode up the hill, and then Prokhor, who had been concentratedly pondering over something, asked Grigory:

"What do you think, Panteleyevich? Haven't we poured out enough blood on the earth?"

"About enough."

"But what do you think, will it be finished soon?"

"It'll finish when they've smashed us."

"Well, it's a gay life we've run into, the devil be praised! Mebbe the sooner they smash us, the better. In the German war a man would shoot off his own finger and they'd let him go home. But now you could tear all your hand off and they'd still make you serve. They take the halt, the maimed, the blind; they take the ruptured, they take all sorts of scum, so long as they can toddle on their two legs. Is that the way to bring the war to an end? May they all be damned!" Prokhor said in despair, and, turning off the road, he dismounted, muttering something in an undertone, and began to loosen his horse's saddle-girths.

After nightfall they arrived at a hamlet situated not far from Ust-Medveditskaya. A picket of the 3rd Regiment, posted on the outskirts of the village, held them up, but, recognizing their divisional commander by his voice, the Cossacks reported that the divisional staff was situated in this very village, and that the chief of staff, Captain Kopylov, was expecting him any minute. The garrulous outpost commander detailed a Cossack to lead Grigory to the staff and added as his final word:

"They've taken up very strong positions, Grigory Panteleyevich, we won't be taking Ust-Medveditskaya for a long time, I reckon. And then, of course, who knows...? We've got plenty of troops, too. They say British troops are arriving from Morozovskaya. Have you heard anything about it?"

"No," Grigory answered as he touched up his horse.

The shutters of the house occupied by the staff were closed and fastened. Grigory thought there was nobody in, but as he entered the corridor, he heard

muffled, animated talk. After the darkness outside, the light of the large lamp hanging from the ceiling of the best room blinded him; a thick and pungent smell of tobacco-smoke tickled his nostrils.

"So here you are at last!" Kopylov said in delight, appearing out of the blue cloud of smoke billowing above the table. "We've been a long time waiting for you, brother!"

Grigory greeted everybody, took off his cap and greatcoat, and went to the table.

"You've smoked out the place! There's nothing to breathe! Can't you open one of the windows?" he said, frowning.

Kharlampy Yermakov, who was sitting beside Kopylov, smiled and retorted: "But our noses have got used to it, and we don't even notice it." Pushing out a window-pane with his elbow, he flung open the shutter.

The fresh night air burst into the room. The lamp flame flared up and went out.

"Well, that's a fine way to treat the place! What did you push the pane out for?" Kopylov asked discontentedly, rummaging over the table with his hands. "Who's got any matches? Careful, there's a pot of ink right by the map."

They lit the lamp, covered the hole in the window, and Kopylov hurriedly began to explain matters.

"At the present moment the situation at the front, Comrade Melekhov, is as follows: the Reds are holding Ust-Medveditskaya, covering it on three sides with forces numbering approximately four thousand bayonets. They have sufficient artillery and machine-guns.

They've dug trenches around the monastery and in several other places. They occupy the Don-side heights. And as for their positions, well, I won't say they're inaccessible, but they're decidedly difficult to take. On our side, in addition to the division commanded by General Fitshalaurov and two officers' storm detachments, Bogatiryov's 6th Brigade and our First Division have arrived. But the division isn't up to its full strength; the infantry regiment is missing, it's still somewhere near Ust-Khoperskaya; but the cavalry have all arrived, though the squadrons are far from being up to full strength."

"For instance, in my regiment the Third Squadron numbers only thirty-eight Cossacks," said the commander of the 4th Regiment, Cornet Dudarev.

"And how many were there before?" Yermakov asked.

"Ninety-one."

"Why did you allow the squadron to break up? What sort of commander do you call yourself?" Grigory asked, frowning and drumming on the table.

"Well, who's going to hold them back? They scattered through the villages, rode off to see their folk. But they'll be dribbling back again soon. Three came in today."

Kopylov pushed the map across to Grigory. Pointing with his index finger, he showed the disposition of forces and went on: "We haven't made any attack yet. The 2nd Regiment advanced on foot against this sector yesterday, but without success."

"Heavy losses?"

“According to the regimental commander’s report, yesterday he lost twenty-six men killed and wounded. Now for the relative state of the forces. We’ve got the numerical superiority, but we haven’t sufficient machine-guns to support an infantry attack, and the supply of shells is bad. The ammunition officer has promised us four hundred shells and a hundred and fifty thousand cartridges as soon as they’re brought up. But that’s when they’re brought up, whereas we’ve got to attack tomorrow, so General Fitshalaurov has ordered. He proposes that we should allocate a regiment to support the storm detachments. They went into the attack four times yesterday and suffered enormous losses. I must say they fought like devils! Well, and Fitshalaurov proposes that we should strengthen the right flank and transfer the attack to this point here. D’you see? Here the terrain makes it possible to approach to within two hundred to three hundred paces of the enemy’s lines. And, as it happens, his adjutant has only just ridden off. He brought me and you oral instructions to go to General Fitshalaurov’s headquarters tomorrow morning at six for a conference on the co-ordination of operations. He and his staff are in Bolshoi Senin village at present. The task consists in immediately driving the enemy back, before his reinforcements arrive from Sebyrakovo Station. On the farther side of the Don our forces are not displaying very great activity. . . . The Fourth Division has crossed the Khoper, but the Reds have thrown out strong covering forces and are stubbornly holding the roads to the railway. But meantime they’ve thrown a pontoon bridge across the Don and are removing equip-

ment and reserves from Ust-Medveditskaya as fast as they can."

"The Cossacks are saying that the Allies are on the way. Is that true?"

"There's a rumour that several English batteries and tanks are on their way from Chernyshevsky. But this is the question: how are these tanks going to cross the Don? In my opinion, it's only talk in regard to the tanks. That sort of talk has been going around for some time. . . ."

There was a long silence in the room.

Kopylov unbuttoned his brown officer's tunic, rested his plump unshaven cheeks on his hands, and long and reflectively chewed a burned-out cigarette. His dark, round, wide-set eyes were half closed with weariness, his handsome face was marred by the traces of sleepless nights.

At one time this man had been a teacher in a parish school. On Sundays he had been the guest of merchants in the district and had played cards for small stakes with the merchants and their wives; he had played the guitar well and had been a gay, sociable young man. Then he had married a young woman teacher, and he would have gone on living in the district centre and doubtless would have worked until he retired on a pension, but during the World War he had been called up for service. After training in a cadets' military college he had been sent with one of the Cossack regiments to the front. The war did not change his character and appearance at all. There was something inoffensive, fundamentally civilian about his full, short figure, his good-natured face,

the way he carried his sword, the way he addressed subordinates. His voice lacked the metallic tone of command characteristic of the soldier; he wore his officer's uniform like a sack; despite his three years at the front he had never acquired a military bearing and trim. All his looks betokened a man who was in the war by accident. He was more like a stout burgher dressed in officer's uniform than a genuine officer, yet the Cossacks had great respect for him and listened to what he said at staff conferences. The insurgent command greatly esteemed his sober mind, his easy-going character and undemonstrative bravery, which he had often proved in battle.

Grigory's previous chief of staff had been the illiterate and ignorant Ensign Kruzhilin. Kruzhilin had been killed in action on the Chir, and when Kopylov took over the staff he carried out his duties intelligently, prudently, and with success. He sat as conscientiously planning operations as he had once sat over the correction of his pupils' exercise books. Yet, when required, at a word from Grigory he left the staff to look after itself, mounted a horse, and, taking over the command of a regiment, led it into battle.

At first Grigory had been a little prejudiced against his new chief of staff; but in the course of a couple of months he came to know him better and one day after being in battle told him frankly:

"I thought pretty poorly of you, Kopylov, but now I see I was wrong; so what I ask you is to overlook it if you can."

Kopylov smiled and made no answer, but he was obviously flattered by this gruff confession.

He lacked all desire for fame and possessed no fixed political views, and his attitude to the war was that it was a necessary evil which he longed to see ended as quickly as possible. So now he was not considering how to develop operations for the capture of Ust-Medveditskaya, but was recalling his people at home, his native village, and thinking it would be a good idea to gallop home on leave for a month or six weeks. . . .

Grigory gazed long at Kopylov, then rose to his feet.

"Well, brothers and atamans, let's go to our quarters and sleep. There's no point in sitting here racking our brains over the capture of Ust-Medveditskaya. The generals will think and decide for us now. We'll ride off to Fiushalaurov tomorrow; let him teach us, poor devils, some sense! But this is what I think in regard to the 2nd Regiment: we've still got the authority, and I think it would be best to degrade Regimental Commander Dudarev and strip him of his rank and titles."

"And his ration of porridge," Yermakov interrupted.

"No, I'm not joking," Grigory went on. "We must reduce him this very day to the rank of squadron commander and send Kharlampy as commander of the regiment. You go off at once, Yermakov, take over the regiment, and wait for our instructions tomorrow morning. Kopylov will write out the order for the change of command at once, you can take it with you. As I see it, Dudarev will never manage a regiment. He's got no sense at all, and I'm afraid he'll lay the

Cossacks open to a fresh blow. You know what infantry fighting is. . . . It's easy enough to waste men's lives, if the commander doesn't know what he's doing."

"That's true. I'm in favour of degrading Dudarev," Kopylov supported Grigory.

"Well, Yermakov, are you against?" Grigory asked, noticing a look of dissatisfaction on Yermakov's face.

"Why, no; I didn't say anything. Can't I even raise my eyebrows now?"

"So much the better. Yermakov is not against. Ryabchikov will take over his mounted regiment for the present. Kopylov, write out the order, and then get some sleep until dawn comes. And up again at six. We'll go and see this general. I'm taking four orderlies with me."

Kopylov raised his eyebrows in astonishment. "What do you want them all for?"

"For show! After all, we're not nobodies either, we command a division." Grigory laughed and straightened his shoulders, threw his greatcoat over them, and went to the door.

He lay down under the eaves of a shed, covering himself with a horse-cloth, and not removing his boots or his greatcoat. For a long time the orderlies were noisy in the yard; somewhere close at hand horses snorted and champed steadily. There was a scent of fresh dung-fuel and of earth not yet cool after the heat of the day. Through his drowsiness Grigory heard the orderlies' voices and laughter and heard one of them, a youngster, judging from his tones, saddle his horse and declare with a sigh:

"Ah, brothers, I'm fed up! Here it is midnight, and off I've got to ride with a packet. Never any sleep for us, or rest. . . . Whoa, stand still, you devil! Your hoof, raise your hoof, I tell you!"

And a second man muttered in a deep hoarse voice:

"We're fed up with you, soldiering, fed up to the back teeth! You've worn out all our good horses. . . ." His voice changed to a brisk tone of request: "Pour us out some baccy for a cigarette. Ah, you're a fine friend! You've forgotten the Red Army boots I gave you when we were at Belyavin, haven't you? You swine! Others would have remembered me for ever because of those boots, but I can't even wheedle baccy for a cigarette out of you!"

The bit clanked and rattled against the horse's teeth. The horse breathed long and deeply and trotted off, its shoes clattering dryly over the stonily hard, dry earth. "They're all talking about the same thing. 'We're fed up with you, soldiering, fed up to the back teeth!'" Grigory mentally repeated, smiling. And he at once fell off to sleep. The moment he dozed off he had a dream which he had dreamed many times before. . . . Over the brown fields, over high-standing stubble, lines of Red Army men were moving. The first line extended as far as the eye could reach. Behind it were six or seven other lines. The men drew nearer and nearer in the oppressive silence. The little black figures grew, increased in size, and now he could see them coming on at a swift, stumbling stride, on, on, on, coming within firing range, running with their rifles at the trail, in flappy cloth helmets, with

mouths gaping silently. Grigory was lying in a shallow trench, convulsively jerking the bolt of his rifle, firing again and again; under his fire the Red Army men stumbled and fell headlong; he thrust in a fresh clip of cartridges and, glancing for a second to either side, saw the Cossacks leaping out of the neighbouring trenches. They turned and ran, their faces distorted with fear. He could hear the terrible beating of his heart; he shouted: "Fire! You swine! Where are you going? Stop, don't run!" He shouted at the top of his voice, but his voice was terrifyingly weak, scarcely audible. He was seized with horror. He, too, jumped up, and as he stood he fired a last time at a dark-faced Red Army man who was silently running straight towards him. He saw he had missed. The soldier was not young and had a tensely serious, fearless face. He ran lightly, his feet hardly touching the ground, his brows knitted, his cap on the back of his head, the edges of his greatcoat tucked up. For a moment Grigory stared at the approaching enemy, saw his glittering eyes and pale cheeks overgrown with a short, curly beard, saw the broad tops of his boots, the little black eye of the slightly depressed rifle-barrel, and above it, rising and falling rhythmically, the point of the dark bayonet. An indescribable terror took possession of him. He tugged at the bolt of his rifle, but the bolt would not shift, it had jammed. In despair he beat the bolt against his knee, with no result. But the Red Army man was now only five paces away. Grigory turned and fled. Before him all the bare brown field was sprinkled with fleeing

Cossacks. Behind him he heard his pursuer breathing heavily, heard the hollow thud of his boots. But he could not run any faster. He had to make a terrible effort to force his sagging legs to move faster. At last he reached a gloomy, half-ruined graveyard, jumped across the fallen fence, ran between the sunken graves, the crooked crosses and little shrines. Yet one more effort and he would be safe. But now the thunder of feet behind him increased, grew even louder. The pursuer's burning breath scorched his neck, and at that moment he felt himself seized by the tail and skirt of his greatcoat. A muffled cry burst from him, and he awoke.

He was lying on his back. His feet had gone numb in their tight boots; there was cold sweat on his brow, all his body ached as though he had been thrashed. "Oh, hell!" he said hoarsely, listening with satisfaction to his own voice and still unable to believe that what he had just lived through was a dream. Then he turned over on his side, wrapped himself up to his head in his greatcoat, and thought: "I ought to have let him come close, parried his blow, struck him down with the butt, and then run. . . ."

For a moment he lay reflecting on this dream he had now had several times, experiencing a joyous emotion at the feeling that it was only a bad dream and that in reality there was no danger near at all. "Queer how in a dream everything's ten times as terrible as in real life. Never known such terror in all my life, even in the tightest corners," he thought as he dozed off, gratefully stretching out his numbed legs.

Kopylov aroused him at dawn.

"Get up, it's time to get ready and go. We were ordered to be there at six!"

The chief of staff had only just shaved, cleaned his boots, and put on his creased but clean tunic. He had obviously been in a hurry: his plump cheeks had two razor cuts. But he had a general air of spruce elegance that he had lacked before.

Grigory ran his eyes critically over him and thought: "Bah, how he's togged himself up! He doesn't want to look rough when he presents himself to the general. . . ."

As though he had followed the course of Grigory's thought, Kopylov said: "It's bad to turn up looking slovenly. I advise you to make yourself presentable, too."

"I'll go as I am!" Grigory muttered, stretching himself. "You say we were ordered to be there at six? So they're already beginning to send you and me orders?"

Kopylov laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"New times, new manners! As he's senior in rank, we're bound to obey. Fitchalaurov's a general, it's not for him to come to us."

"You're right; we've got what we asked for," Grigory said, and went off to the well to wash.

The mistress of the house rushed indoors, brought out a clean, embroidered hand-towel, and bobbed as she handed it to him. With the end of the towel he furiously rubbed at his face, burned a brick-red by the cold water, and said to Kopylov:

"You're quite right; but these generals had better bear in mind this one thing: the people have changed since the Revolution; they've been born again, as you might say. But the officers still go on measuring with the same old yardstick. I'm afraid their yardstick will snap soon.... The officers are a little stiff in the joints. They need some axle-grease in their brains, to stop the creaking."

"What are you getting at?" Kopylov abstractedly asked, as he blew a speck of dirt from his sleeve.

"Why, at the fact that they're carrying on just in the same old way. For instance, I've held the rank of officer ever since the German war. I earned it with my blood! But when I'm in officers' company I feel just as if I was going out of a hut into the frost in my pants. I can feel their coldness towards me all down my back!" Grigory's eyes glittered furiously and, without knowing it, he raised his voice.

Kopylov looked about him displeased, and whispered:

"Don't talk so loud; the orderlies will hear."

"And why is it, I ask you?" Grigory went on, lowering his voice. "Why, it's because to them I'm a white blackbird. Look at their hands.... And look at mine, hard as a horse's hoof! They can bow and scrape, but when I come into a room, I knock into everything. They smell of toilet soap and all sorts of womanish creams and paints, but I smell of horse-piss and sweat. They're all educated, but I hardly got through a church school. I'm foreign to them from my head to my heels. That's why it's all like that! And when I leave them I always have the feeling that

a spider-web has settled on my face: I'm ticklish all over and uncomfortable, and all I want is to get clean." He threw the towel down on the well-frame and combed his hair with a broken comb. Untouched by sunburn, his forehead showed a brilliant white against his swarthy face. "They don't want to understand that all the old life has broken to pieces and gone to hell!" he went on more quietly. "They think we're made of different dough, that an uneducated man, one of the ordinary folk, is some sort of cattle. They think that in military affairs I, or such as I, understand less than them. But who are the Reds' commanders? Is Budyonny an officer? He was a sergeant in pre-war days, but it was he who gave the generals of the staff a good hiding! Guselshchikov is the most famous fighter of all the Cossack generals, but he galloped away from Ust-Khoperskaya in only his pants last winter. And do you know who sent him packing? Some Moscow locksmith, a Red regimental commander. The prisoners were all talking about him afterwards. You've got to understand that! And how about us, uneducated officers, did we lead the Cossacks so badly during the rising? Did the generals help us much?"

"They helped quite a lot," Kopylov said significantly.

"Well, they may have helped Kudinov, but I've gone without their help, and beaten the Reds without listening to others' counsels."

"Well, and what of it; don't you believe in applying science to military matters?"

"Yes, I do. But that's not the main thing in war, brother."

"Well, what is, Panteleyevich?"

"The cause you're fighting for."

"Well, that's another thing..." Kopylov said, smiling restrainedly. "That goes without saying.... In this war the idea's the main thing. The one who wins is the one who knows what he's fighting for and believes in his cause. That's a truth as old as the world itself, and it's no use your trying to put it forward as a discovery of your own. I'm for the old, for the good old times. If things were going to be different I wouldn't lift a finger to go anywhere or fight for anything. All those on our side are men who are defending their old privileges, suppressing the revolting people by force of arms. And you and I are among those suppressors. I've been studying you for a long time, Grigory Panteleyevich, and I can't understand you."

"You'll understand later. Let's go," Grigory retorted, and went towards the shed.

Desiring to please him, the mistress of the house, who had been watching his every movement, said to Grigory:

"Would you like a drink of milk?"

"Thank you, mother, but I haven't time to drink milk. I'll have some later."

Near a shed Prokhor Zykov was zealously spooning sour milk out of a cup. He did not wink an eye as he watched Grigory untie his horse. He wiped his lips with his sleeve, and asked: "Going far? Am I coming with you?"

Grigory boiled over and said with cold fury:

"You mange, what the hell are you playing at? Don't you know your duty? What's my horse standing bridled for? Who's supposed to bring me my horse? You devil's glutton! You're always chewing! Now, drop that spoon! Where's your discipline? You bottomless pit!"

"And what have you flared up for?" Prokhor muttered in an injured tone as he made himself comfortable in the saddle. "You bawl away, but it's all for nothing. You're not such a big shot anyway. Can't I have a bite or sup before a journey? What are you shouting about?"

"Because you're letting me down, you pig's chitterlings! How dare you speak to me like that? We're just off to call on a general, so you keep your eyes skinned! You're too used to being familiar with your superiors! Who am I to you? Ride five paces behind!" Grigory ordered as he rode out of the gate.

Prokhor and the three other orderlies fell back, and Grigory, riding beside Kopylov, continued the conversation. He asked in a jesting tone:

"Well, what is it you don't understand? Maybe I can explain to you?"

Not noticing the sneer in the tone of Grigory's voice and the form of his question Kopylov answered:

"Why, I don't understand your position in this business, that's what. On the one hand you're fighting for the old regime, but on the other hand you're something—excuse me if I put it bluntly—something rather on the lines of a Bolshevik yourself."

"How am I a Bolshevik?" Grigory's face clouded and he fidgeted in the saddle.

"I don't say you are a Bolshevik, but something rather like a Bolshevik."

"In what way, I ask."

"Well, take your talk about the officers and their attitude to you. What do you want them to do? And what is it you want at all, for that matter?" Kopylov questioned, smiling good-naturedly and playing with his whip. He glanced back at the orderlies, who were animatedly discussing something, and raised his voice: "You're offended because they don't accept you as an equal, because they look down on you. But they're quite right from their point of view, you must realize that. It's true you're an officer, but it's only by chance that you've reached the rank of officer. Even when you wear an officer's uniform you're still—forgive me for saying so—a rough and ready Cossack. You've got no manners, you express yourself badly and coarsely, you lack all the qualities which are natural to an educated man. For instance, instead of using a handkerchief, as all cultured people do, you blow your nose on your finger and thumb; when you're eating you wipe your hands on the leg of your boot or on your hair; after washing you're not too squeamish to wipe your face on a horse-cloth; you either bite your nails short or cut them with the end of your sword. Or even better. Last winter in Karginskaya I heard you talking to a certain woman of the intelligentsia, whose husband had been arrested by the Cossacks, and you stood buttoning up your fly in front of her."

"So it would have been better if I'd left it undone?" Grigory asked smiling morosely.

Their horses were striding along side by side, and Grigory took a sidelong look at Kopylov, at his good-natured face, and listened with a touch of chagrin to his words.

"That's not the point," Kopylov exclaimed, frowning with annoyance. "How can you interview a woman at all when all you're wearing is your trousers and you've got bare feet? You didn't even fling your jacket around your shoulders, I remember that very well. Of course, these are small things, but they sum you up as a man.... How shall I put it?"

"Put it as simply as possible!"

"Well, as an extremely boorish sort of man. And the way you speak! It's horrible! Instead of 'quarters,' you say 'quawters'; instead of 'evacuation,' you say 'evakiation'; for 'apparently' you say 'it looks like as if.' And, like all illiterate people, you have an inexplicable passion for fine-sounding foreign words; you use them in season and out of season, you twist them unbelievably, and when military terminology is used at staff conferences—such words as 'dislocation,' 'dispositions,' 'concentrations,' and so on—you stare at the speaker in admiration and, I venture to say, even with envy."

"Now you're talking bosh!" Grigory exclaimed, and a merry look appeared on his face. Stroking his horse between its ears, scratching its silkily warm skin under the mane, he said: "Well, carry on; give your commander a good dressing-down!"

"Now, listen: why should I dress you down? It ought to be quite clear to you yourself that you happen to be unfortunate in regard to these things. And then you get upset because the officers don't treat you as an equal. So far as manners and education are concerned you're just a blockhead!" The insulting term fell out almost by accident, and Kopylov took alarm. He knew how uncontrollable was Grigory's anger, and he was afraid of an outburst. But he took a swift glance at Grigory and at once felt reassured: throwing himself back in the saddle, Grigory was laughing silently, and a dazzling row of teeth gleamed under his whiskers. Kopylov was so surprised at this result of his words, and Grigory's laugh was so infectious, that he also burst into laughter, saying: "There you are! A sensible man would have wept at such a scolding, but you're neighing away.... You're just a mystery!"

"So you call me a blockhead? Then damn you!" Grigory remarked when he stopped laughing. "I don't want to learn your manners and customs. They'll be no use to me when I'm driving bullocks. But God grant, if I live so long, I shall have to handle bullocks, and it won't do for me to bow and scrape to them and say: 'Ah, do submit, Baldhead! Pardon me, Speckle! Permit me to adjust the yoke on you! My dear sir, Mr. Bullock, I most humbly request you not to break down the furrows.' You have to be a bit gruffer with them: 'Gee up!' That's all the bullocks know about your dishlocation."

"Not 'dishlocation,' but 'dislocation,'" Kopylov corrected him.

"All right, dislocation. But there's one thing I don't agree with you on."

"What's that?"

"That I'm a blockhead. I may be a blockhead to you, but you wait a bit! Give me time, and I'll go over to the Reds, and with them I shall be heavier than lead. And then you well-mannered and educated parasites had better not fall into my hands! I shall wring out your guts, and your souls with them!" Grigory said, half in jest, half serious. He touched up his horse, putting it into a sharp trot.

Over the Don-side lands the morning was coming in such a fine-spun silence that every sound, even the faintest, disturbed it and awoke the echoes. In the steppe only the skylarks and quails were in possession, but in the near-by hamlets that incessant, quiet rumbling could be heard which always accompanies the movement of large military forces. Gun-carriage wheels and ammunition wagons clattered in the ruts, horses were neighing by the wells, the tramp of passing companies of infantry Cossacks was soft and muffled, britzkas and lines of civilian wagons carrying stores and ammunition up to the front clattered along; around the field-kitchens hung a pleasant smell of stewing millet, of tinned meat garnished with laurel leaves, and of fresh-baked bread.

Below Ust-Medveditskaya itself a frequent exchange of rifle-fire was going on, and occasional cannon-shots boomed lazily and hollowly. The battle had just began.

General Fitshalaurov was having breakfast when an elderly, harassed-looking adjutant reported:

"The commander of the First Insurgent Division, Melekhov, and his divisional chief of staff, Kopylov."

"Ask them to my room." With a large, gnarled hand Fitshalaurov pushed away his plate with its litter of egg-shell, unhurriedly drank a glass of fresh milk, and, neatly folding his serviette, rose from the table.

Of extraordinary height, agedly massive and puffy, he seemed incredibly large in that tiny Cossack room with its crooked door lintels and dim and small windows. Coughing hollowly, adjusting the high collar of his irreproachably fitting uniform, the general passed into the next room, curtly bowed to Kopylov and Grigory as they rose to their feet, and, not offering them his hand, beckoned them to the table.

Steadying his sword with his hand, Grigory cautiously sat down on the very edge of the stool and glanced sidelong at Kopylov.

Fitshalaurov heavily lowered himself on to the bent-wood chair, making it creak beneath him, bent his long legs, laid his great hands on his knees, and said in a thick, low voice:

"I have invited you here, gentlemen, in order to settle certain questions.... The insurgent partisan warfare is finished. Your forces will cease to exist as an independent unit, and, for that matter, they never have been a unit in reality. A fiction! They are to be amalgamated with the Don Army. We shall pass to a planned offensive. It is time to realize that, and unconditionally to subordinate yourselves to the orders of the higher command. Be so good as to inform me why your infantry regiment did not support the storm battalion's attack yesterday. Why did

the regiment refuse to go into the attack, despite my orders? Who is the commander of your so-called division?"

"I am," Grigory answered in a low voice.

"Be so good as to answer the question, then."

"I didn't return to the division till yesterday."

"And where had you been pleased to be before that?"

"I had been home on a visit."

"A divisional commander is pleased to go home on a visit at a time of military operations! The division's a rabble! Sheer degeneration! A disgusting state of affairs!" The general's bass voice thundered louder and louder in the confined space of the little room; outside, the adjutants went about on tiptoe, whispering, smiling to one another. Kopylov's cheeks turned whiter but as Grigory stared at the general's face, at his swollen, clenched fists, he felt an uncontrollable frenzy awakening in himself also.

Fitshalaurov jumped up with unexpected agility and, gripping the back of his chair, shouted:

"It's not military forces you command, but Red Guard rabble! They're not Cossacks, they're the dregs of humanity! You, Mr. Melekhov, shouldn't be in command of a division, you should be working as an orderly. You ought to be cleaning boots! Do you hear? Why wasn't the order obeyed? Because you couldn't hold a meeting? You didn't have time to discuss it? Beware! We're not 'comrades' here, and we won't allow the introduction of Bolshevik methods. We won't allow it!"

"I must ask you not to bawl at me!" Grigory said in a thick voice, and rose, pushing back his stool with his foot.

"What did you say?" Fitshalaurov cried hoarsely, panting with agitation, leaning across the table.

"I must ask you not to bawl at me!" Grigory repeated in a louder tone. "You sent for us in order to decide—" He was silent for a second, lowered his eyes, and, not removing his gaze from Fitshalaurov's hands, dropped his voice almost to a whisper. "If you, Your Excellency, attempt to lay even your little finger on me, I shall sabre you on the spot!"

The room grew so quiet that Fitshalaurov's gasping breath could be heard distinctly. The silence lasted a good minute. The door creaked a little. A scared adjutant looked through the chink. The door was as cautiously closed. Grigory stood with his hand gripping his sabre-hilt. Kopylov's knees were trembling, his eyes wandered over the wall. Fitshalaurov dropped heavily into his chair, uttered a senile cough and grunted: "A fine business!" Then, quite quietly, but not looking at Grigory: "Sit down! We got rather worked up, and now it's past. Now be so good as to listen. I order you immediately to transfer all your mounted forces—But sit down, do!"

Grigory sat down and with his sleeves wiped away the copious sweat which had suddenly beaded his face.

"To proceed. All mounted forces are immediately to be transferred to the south-east sector and to open an attack at once. On your right flank you will be in contact with the Second Battalion of the military commander Chumakov. . . ."

"I shall not take the division there," Grigory said in a weary tone, and groped in his trouser pocket for his handkerchief. With Natalya's lace handkerchief he once more wiped the sweat from his brow, and repeated: "I shall not take the division there."

"And why not?"

"The regrouping of forces will take a lot of time. . . ."

"That's nothing to do with you. I am responsible for the outcome of the operation."

"But it has to do with me, and you're not the only one who will be responsible."

"So you refuse to carry out my command?" Fitshalaurov asked hoarsely, restraining himself with obvious effort.

"Yes."

"In that case be so good as to hand over the command of the division at once! Now I understand why yesterday's order was not carried out. . . ."

"You can please yourself about that, but I shall not hand over the command of the division."

"And how am I to understand that?"

"Just as I said." Grigory smiled almost imperceptibly.

"I dismiss you from your command!" Fitshalaurov raised his voice. But Grigory at once rose to his feet.

"I am not subordinate to you, Your Excellency!"

"Then whom are you subordinate to?"

"I'm subordinate to the commander of the insurgent forces, Kudinov. And I'm surprised to hear all this from you. . . . At the moment, at least, you and I have equal rights. You command a division, and I command

a division. So for the time being you'd better not shout at me. . . . When I'm reduced to the rank of squadron commander, then by all means! But even then—" Grigory raised his dirty forefinger and, smiling even while his eyes blazed furiously, he ended: "Even then I'm not going to be shouted at."

Fitshalaurov rose, adjusted his tight collar, and said with a slight bow:

"There is nothing more for us to discuss. Do as you wish. I shall immediately report your conduct to the army staff and, I dare to assure you, the results will not be slow in revealing themselves. Our field court martial is at present functioning with the greatest promptitude."

Paying no attention to Kopylov's despairing glances, Grigory clapped on his cap and went to the door. At the threshold he halted and said:

"You can report to where you like, but you can't frighten me. I'm not a nervous sort. . . . And for the present you'd better keep your hands off me. . . ." He stood thinking a moment and added: "For I am afraid my Cossacks might shake you up a bit. . . ." He kicked open the door and, his sabre clattering, went with a swinging stride into the porch.

The agitated Kopylov overtook him on the steps.

"You're mad, Panteleyevich!" he whispered, squeezing his hands in despair.

"The horses!" Grigory shouted in a ringing voice, crushing his whip in his hands.

Prokhor flew up to the steps like a devil.

As Grigory rode out of the gate he looked back: three orderlies were fussing around General Fitsha-

laurov, helping him to climb on to the handsome saddle of his high-standing horse.

Grigory and Kopylov rode for nearly half a verst in silence. Kopylov held his peace, realizing that Grigory was not inclined for conversation, and that at the moment it would be dangerous to argue with him. At last Grigory could no longer restrain himself.

"Why are you so quiet?" he asked sharply. "What did you come with me for? To act as a witness? You kept quiet on purpose, did you?"

"Well, man, you certainly let yourself go!"

"And didn't he?"

"I grant you he was in the wrong, too. The way he spoke to you was absolutely disgusting."

"I wouldn't say he spoke to us at all! Right from the start he bawled as though someone had stuck a needle in his arse."

"All the same you did a fine thing! Insubordination to a senior officer ... in field conditions, my friend...."

"That's nothing! The only pity is that he didn't try to attack me! I'd have brought my blade down hard enough to splinter his brain-box!"

"As it is, you can't expect any good to come from it!" Kopylov said discontentedly, and slowed his horse to a walk. "Everything goes to show they'll be tightening up discipline, so you had better look out!"

Snorting, their horses walked side by side, flicking off the gadflies with their tails. Grigory mockingly ran his eyes over Kopylov and asked:

"What did you tog yourself up like that for? I suppose you thought he'd invite you to a cup of tea?"

Thought he'd lead you to the table with his own fair hand? Shaved yourself, cleaned your tunic, polished your boots. . . . I saw you spit on your nose-rag and clean spots off your knees!"

"Please drop it!" Kopylov reddened.

"And all your labour was in vain!" Grigory jeered. "Not only was there no tea, but he didn't even offer you his hand."

"With you present it might have been worse," Kopylov muttered hurriedly. Screwing up his eyes, in amazement and delight he exclaimed: "Look! They're not ours! They're Allies."

A team of six mules was dragging a British gun towards them along the narrow street. At its side a British officer was riding on a dock-tailed sorrel horse. The rider on the leading mule was also in British uniform, but he had a Russian officer's cockade in the band of his cap, and he was wearing lieutenant's epaulets.

When still several paces away from Grigory, the officer set two fingers to the peak of his cork helmet and, with a movement of his head, requested Grigory to make way. The street was so narrow that it was only possible to pass by edging the saddle-horses right up against the stone wall at the side.

The muscles quivered in Grigory's cheeks. Clenching his teeth, he rode straight at the officer. The man raised his brows in astonishment and drew a little aside. They passed with difficulty, and even then the Englishman had to lay his right leg, in its tight leather legging, along his thoroughbred mare's gleaming, beautifully curried croup.

One of the artillery team, apparently a Russian officer, angrily looked Grigory up and down.

"I think you might have drawn aside! Surely you don't have to exhibit your rudeness even here?" he remarked.

"You ride on and shut up, you bitch's adder, or I'll put you aside!" Grigory advised him half aloud.

The officer raised himself on his seat, turned, and shouted: "Gentlemen! Hold this rascal!"

Expressively swinging his whip, Grigory made his way at a walking pace along the lane. The weary, dusty artillerymen, all of them young officers without moustaches, gave him unfriendly glances; but not one attempted to restrain him. The six-gun battery vanished round a bend, and Kopylov, biting his lips, rode up alongside Grigory.

"You're playing the fool, Grigory Panteleyevich! You're behaving like a little child!"

"Why, have you been attached to me as my teacher?" Grigory snapped back.

"I can understand you getting angry with Fitshalaurov," Kopylov said, shrugging his shoulders, "but what had that Englishman done to you? Didn't you like his helmet?"

"I didn't quite like it here, close to Ust-Medveditskaya—he could have worn it somewhere else.... When two dogs are snapping at each other, a third doesn't interfere, you understand?"

"Aha! So you're against foreign intervention? But I think when you're seized by the throat, you're glad of any help."

"Well, you can be glad, but I wouldn't let them set foot on our soil."

"Have you seen the Chinese fighting with the Reds?"

"Well?"

"Isn't that just the same? They're foreign help, too, you know."

"That's nothing to do with it! The Chinese volunteered to help the Reds."

"And do you think these others have been forced to come here?"

Grigory did not know what to answer, and he rode a long time in silence, tormentedly thinking it over. Then he said, with unconcealed chagrin in his voice:

"You educated people are always like that. You twist and turn like hares in the snow! I feel that your argument isn't sound somewhere, but I don't know how to pin you down. Let's drop the subject. Don't tangle me up, I'm already muddled enough without your help."

Kopylov offendedly lapsed into silence, and they said no more for the rest of the ride. Except that Prokhor, goaded by curiosity, rode up to them and asked:

"Grigory Panteleyevich—Your Excellency—would you tell me what those animals were the cadets had got harnessed to the guns? They'd got ears like asses, but the rest of them was a natural horse. I hardly liked to look at the brutes. What the devil are they? Would you mind telling me, we've got a bet on it. . . ."

For a good five minutes he rode behind them, but got no answer. So he fell back and, when the other orderlies drew level with him, informed them in a whisper:

"They haven't got a word to say, brothers. I reckon they're wondering themselves how the filthy brutes came into the world."

XI

For the fourth time the Cossack companies rose from their shallow trenches and, under the Reds' murderous machine-gun fire, lay down again. From early dawn the Red Army batteries concealed in the forest on the left bank had been pounding incessantly at the Cossack positions and the reserves assembled in the ravines.

Milkily white, melting clouds of shrapnel blazed up over the Don-side heights. Before and behind the broken line of Cossack trenches the bullets sent the brown dust flying.

Towards noon the fight grew fiercer, and the western wind carried the roar of artillery fire far along the Don.

From an insurgent battery's observation post Grigory watched the course of the battle through field-glasses. He could see that despite their losses the officers' companies persistently advanced into the attack in a series of short sprints. When the fire intensified they lay down, digging themselves in, and then in another series of sprints they moved on to a new point. But more to the left, in the direction of the monastery, the insurgent infantry showed no signs of activity at all. Grigory wrote a note for Yermakov and sent it by a courier.

Yermakov rode up in a fury half an hour later. He dismounted by the battery tether-rail and, breath-

ing heavily, made his way to the trench of the observation post.

"I can't get the Cossacks to move! They won't move!" he shouted when still some distance off, waving his hands. "We've already lost twenty-three men, gone as though they'd never been. Did you see the way the Reds mowed them down with machine-guns?"

"The officers are advancing, but you tell me you can't get your men on to their feet?" Grigory hissed through his teeth.

"But you look! Every one of their platoons has got a light machine-gun, and they're stuffed with cartridges to their eyebrows. But what have we got?"

"None of your excuses! Get them into the attack at once or we'll have your head off!"

Yermakov cursed terribly and ran down from the rise. Grigory followed him, resolved to lead the 2nd Infantry Regiment into the attack himself.

Close to the flank gun, which was cleverly concealed under branches of hawthorn, he was halted by the battery commander.

"Just come and admire the British handiwork, Grigory Panteleyevich! They're about to open fire on the bridge. Let's go up to the top of the rise."

Through field-glasses they could just discern the slender ribbon of the pontoon bridge which Red engineers had thrown across the Don. Wagons were rolling across it in an unbroken stream.

Some ten minutes later the British battery, mounted in a hollow beyond a stony ridge, opened fire. With the fourth shell the bridge was smashed almost in its

centre. The stream of wagons came to a halt. The Red Army men hurriedly set to work to throw the shattered britzkas and dead horses into the river.

Four barges crowded with engineers cast off from the right bank. But as soon as they had succeeded in repairing the broken planking of the bridge, the British battery sent over another packet of shells. One of them blew the approach ramp on the left bank high into the air, the second sent up a green column of water right by the bridge, and the stream of wagons once more came to a halt.

"They can certainly put up an accurate fire, the sons of bitches!" Grigory's battery commander said in admiration. "Now they won't give them a chance to cross till nightfall. That bridge isn't going to be left whole for a minute!"

Without removing his field-glasses from his eyes, Grigory asked: "But why are your guns silent? You should be supporting your infantry. You can see the Red machine-gun nests plainly enough."

"I'd be glad to, but we haven't got one shell left. It's half an hour since I sent over the last one and began to fast."

"Then what are you stopping here for? Harness up and clear out of the way."

"I've sent to ask the cadets for shells."

"They won't let you have any," Grigory said decisively.

"They have refused us once, but I've asked again. They may take pity this time. They might let us have a couple of dozen just to smash those machine-guns. It's no joke, their killing twenty-three of our men.

And how many more will they mow down? Look at them stitching away!"

Grigory turned his gaze to the Cossack trenches; on the near-by slope the bullets were still kicking up the dry earth. Wherever the line of machine-gun fire was laid, a strip of dust arose, as though some invisible hand were drawing a thin grey line over the trenches. Along their entire length the Cossack trenches seemed to be smoking; the dust hung above them in clouds.

Grigory no longer watched the fire of the British battery. For a minute he listened to the incessant thunder of artillery and machine-guns, then strode down from the mound and overtook Yermakov.

"Don't go into the attack until you receive orders from me," he said. "We'll never drive them out without artillery support."

"Didn't I tell you so?" Yermakov said reproachfully, mounting his horse, still excited from the gallop and the gunfire.

Grigory watched as Yermakov fearlessly galloped off under fire, and thought anxiously: "What the devil has he taken the direct road for? They'll mow him down with a machine-gun. He should have dropped into the hollow, ridden along the watercourse and made his way round the hill back to his men." At a furious gallop, Yermakov rode to the hollow, plunged into it, and did not appear again on the farther side. "So he's realized! Now he'll get there!" Grigory sighed with relief and lay down below the rise, unhurriedly rolling a cigarette.

He was possessed by a strange indifference. No, he would not lead the Cossacks out under that

machine-gun fire. There was no point in it. Let the officers' storm companies make the attack. Let them capture Ust-Medveditskaya. There, lying under the rise, for the first time in his life he evaded directly taking part in a battle. It was not cowardice, not fear of death or of useless losses, that governed his decision at that moment. Not long before, he had spared neither his own life nor the lives of the Cossacks entrusted to his command. But now it was as though something had snapped.... Never before had he realized so clearly all the senselessness of what was going on around him. It may have been the talk with Kopylov, or the clash with Fitshalaurov, or perhaps the two incidents together, that had provoked the mood which had so unexpectedly taken possession of him. In any case he was determined not to expose himself any more under fire. He vaguely considered that it was not his job to reconcile the Cossacks with the Bolsheviks; for that matter, he could not himself be reconciled with them. But he felt that he could not and would no longer defend all these people who were alien in spirit, who were hostile to him—all these Fitshalaurovs, who had a profound contempt for him, and whom he despised no less profoundly. And once more he was faced with the old contradictions in all their inexorability. "Let them fight! I'll stand and look on! The moment I'm relieved of the division I shall ask to be sent to the rear. I've had enough!" he thought and, mentally returning to the argument with Kopylov, he caught himself trying to find justification for the Reds. "The Chinese come to the Reds empty-handed; they join up with them and risk their lives every day

for miserable soldier's pay. And besides, what's the pay to do with it? What the devil can you buy with it? You can only lose it at cards.... So it's not a question of making money, but something else. Yet the Allies are sending officers, tanks, and guns, and they've even sent mules! But afterwards they'll be demanding a handsome pile of rubles for it all! There's the difference! Yes, we'll argue it all out again this evening. As soon as I get back to the staff I shall call him aside and say: 'But there is a difference, Kopylov; and don't try to make a fool of me!'"

But he was not destined to renew the argument. That afternoon Kopylov rode off to the 4th Regiment, which was being held in reserve, and on the way was killed by a stray bullet. Grigory learned of his death only two hours later.

Next morning the Fifth Division, commanded by General Fitshalaurov, took Ust-Medveditskaya by storm.

XII

Some three days after Grigory's departure, Mitka Korshunov turned up in Tatarsky. He was not alone, he was accompanied by two fellow-soldiers from his punitive detachment. One of them was an elderly Kalmyk, the second an insignificant little Cossack. Mitka addressed the Kalmyk contemptuously, but dignified the Cossack, a sly little drunkard, with the title of Silanty Petrovich.

Evidently Mitka had done no small service for the Don Army by his activities in the punitive detachment;

during the winter he had been raised to the rank of sergeant-major and then to that of ensign, and he arrived in the village in all the glory of his officer's uniform. He seemed to have been living quite well during the retreat beyond the Don: his light khaki tunic fitted tightly across his broad shoulders, greasy pink folds of skin lay over his tight, high collar, his blue, striped trousers fitted him so closely that they all but split across the buttocks. With all his superficial virtues Mitka would have been in the Ataman's Lifeguards, he would have lived at the palace and defended the sacred person of His Imperial Majesty, if it had not been for this accursed revolution. But even so, he had no complaint to make of life. He had won his way to officer's rank, and that not like Grigory Melekhov, by risking his head and indulging in reckless heroics. Service in a punitive detachment called for other qualities. Mitka had enough and to spare of such qualities. Having no great trust in the other Cossacks, he himself settled the account of anyone suspected of Bolshevism; he was not too fastidious to deal with deserters with his own hands, wielding a whip or ramrod; and as for cross-examining prisoners, there was no one in the detachment to equal him, and the commander himself shrugged his shoulders and said: "Say what you like, gentlemen, there's no one to beat Korshunov. He's not a man, he's a dragon!" Mitka was distinguished by one other remarkable quality: when it was not advisable to shoot a prisoner, yet it was thought undesirable to let him go free, the man was sentenced to corporal punishment with the birch, and Mitka was entrusted with the

execution of the sentence. He carried out his task so well that after the fiftieth stroke the condemned man succumbed to a bloody vomit, and after a hundred the other Cossacks confidently rolled him up in sacking without listening to his heart. Not one man so sentenced had escaped alive from Mitka's hands. He himself had said more than once with a laugh: "If the trousers and skirts were taken from all the Reds I've thrashed, I could clothe all the village of Tatarsky."

The cruelty innate in Mitka's nature since childhood found fitting application in the punitive detachment and, with nothing to bridle it, developed extraordinarily. By the very nature of his service he came into contact with the dregs of the officer class, with drug addicts, with rapists, with pillagers and other scum, and in his hatred for the Reds he willingly, with all his peasant's assiduity, learned everything that they in their hatred of the Reds could teach him and had no great difficulty in excelling his teachers. Where a neurasthenic officer, worn out with other men's blood and sufferings, could not go on, Mitka only screwed up his yellow, glittering eyes and carried the task through to the end.

Such was Mitka now that he had left his Cossack unit and found an easy life in the punitive detachment of Lieutenant-Colonel Pryanishnikov.

When he arrived in the village, carrying himself with great dignity and hardly deigning to answer the bows of the passing women, he rode at a walking pace towards his home. By the half-burned, smoke-stained gates he dismounted, handed the rein to the Kalmyk,

and strode bow-leggedly into the yard. Accompanied by Silanty, he silently walked round the foundations. With the end of his whip he touched a lump of turquoise-coloured window-glass which had melted during the fire, and said in a voice hoarse with emotion:

"They've burned it down! And it was a wealthy house, the best in the village. One of our own villagers, Misha Koshevoi, burned it. He killed my grandfather, too. Well, Silanty Petrovich, I've had the experience of visiting my native hearth and home...."

"Are any of the Koshevois left behind?" Silanty asked readily.

"There should be. But we'll see them later.... Now let's ride to our father-in-law."

On the road to the Melekhovs' house Mitka asked Bogatiryov's daughter-in-law, whom he happened to meet:

"Has my mother returned from beyond the Don?"

"I don't think she has yet, Mitry Mironich."

"Then is Melekhov at home?"

"The old one?"

"Yes."

"He's at home; the whole family's at home except Grigory. Pyotr was killed last winter; have you heard?"

Mitka nodded and put his horse into a trot.

He rode along the deserted street, and his yellow cat's eyes, satiated and cold, revealed no trace of his recent agitation. As he rode up to the Melekhovs' yard he said in a low tone, not addressing himself to either of his companions particularly:

"That's the way your own native village welcomes you! I've even got to go to relations for dinner.... Well, we'll pull up again yet."

Pantelei Prokofyevich was mending a harvesting machine under a shed. Noticing horsemen, and recognizing Korshunov among them, he went to the gate.

"Come in by all means," he said hospitably, opening the wicket-gate. "We're glad to have guests. Welcome back."

"Hullo, Father! All alive and well?"

"Glory be, all well so far! But surely you aren't going about in officer's uniform?"

"Why, did you think your sons were the only ones entitled to wear the white epaulets?" Mitka said in a self-satisfied tone, offering the old man his long, sinewy hand.

"My sons weren't so very anxious to get them!" Pantelei Prokofyevich answered with a smile, and went in front, to show the newcomers where to tether their horses.

The hospitable Ilyinichna gave the guests dinner, and then they turned to conversation. Mitka asked details of his family, and was taciturn, revealing neither anger nor sorrow. He casually asked whether any of Misha Koshevoi's family was left in the village and, learning that Misha's mother and her children were still at home, gave Silanty a swift, surreptitious wink.

The guests soon made ready to go. As he saw them off, Pantelei Prokofyevich asked:

"Are you thinking of staying long in the village?"

"Well, yes, two or three days perhaps."

"Will you be seeing your mother?"

"That depends."

"And are you going far now?"

"Hm—just going to see some of the people in the village. We'll be back soon."

Before Mitka and his companions had time to return to the Melekhovs' house, the rumour was spreading through the village that Korshunov had arrived with Kalmyks and had killed all the Koshevoi family.

Pantelei did not hear the rumour. He went to the smithy and back and was preparing to tackle the harvesting machine again when Ilyinichna called him in:

"Here, Prokofyevich! Hurry up!"

A note of undisguised alarm sounded in the old woman's voice, and the astonished Pantelei at once made his way to the house.

Natalya was standing, tear-stained and pale, at the stove. With her eyes Ilyinichna indicated Anikushka's wife and asked in hushed tones: "Have you heard the news, Father?"

"Something's happened to Grigory! God be merciful and protect him!" The thought seared Pantelei's mind. He turned pale and, fearful and furious because nobody spoke, shouted:

"Spit it out at once, curse you! Well, what's happened? Something to do with Grigory?" As though rendered helpless by his shout, he dropped on the bench and stroked his trembling legs.

Dunya was the first to realize that her father was afraid of bad news concerning his son, and she hurriedly said:

"No, Dad, it's not news of Grigory. Mitka's killed the Koshevois."

"What do you mean 'killed'?" The weight fell at once from Pantelei's heart and, still not understanding what Dunya had said, he again queried: "The Koshevois? Mitry?"

Anikushka's wife, who had run to the Melekhovs with the news, began to stammer out her story:

"I was looking for our calf, old man, and I happened to go past the Koshevois' hut, and Mitry and two soldiers with him rode up to the yard and went into the hut. I was thinking: the calf won't go farther than the windmill. It was my turn to graze the calves—"

"What the devil do I want to hear about your calf for?" Pantelei broke in angrily.

"—and they went into the hut," the woman went on, sobbing, "and I stood and waited. They're up to no good, I thought. And I heard cries inside, and I could hear the sound of blows. I was frightened to death; I wanted to run, but I'd only just stepped away from the fence when I heard footsteps behind me. I looked back, and there was your Mitka had thrown a rope around the old woman's neck and was dragging her along the ground, just as though she was a dog, God forgive me! He dragged her to the shed, and she, poor thing, didn't make a sound; she must have been unconscious already. The Kalmyk that was with him got up on to a crossbeam. . . . As I watched, Mitka threw the end of the rope up to him and shouted: 'Pull it up and tie it with a knot.' Oh, what I suffered then! In my very sight they strangled the poor old woman, and then jumped on their horses and rode

down the street, to the administration, I expect. I was afraid to go into the hut. . . . But I saw blood trickling from the porch, under the door, on to the steps. God grant I never see such horrors again!"

"Fine guests God's sent us!" Ilyinichna said, looking challengingly at her husband.

Pantelei listened in a state of terrible agitation to the story and, when Anikushka's wife had finished, went out into the porch without saying a word.

Mitka and his assistants appeared at the gate soon afterwards. Pantelei nimbly limped towards them.

"Stop!" he shouted when still some distance away. "Don't bring your horses into this yard!"

"What's the matter, Father-in-Law? Mitka asked in astonishment.

"Turn back!" Pantelei went right up to him and, gazing into Mitka's yellow, glittering eyes, said firmly: "Don't be angry, Cousin, but I don't wish you to stay in my house. You'd better go your way."

"A-ah!" Mitka drawled in an understanding tone, and turned pale. "So you're turning me out?"

"I don't want you to soil my house!" the old man said resolutely. "And never put your foot across my threshold again! We Melekhovs have no kinship with executioners, know that!"

"I understand! But you're a little too merciful, Father-in-Law!"

"And it seems you don't know what mercy is, seeing that you've begun to execute women and children. Ah, Mitka, it's an unworthy trade you've taken up. . . . Your dead father wouldn't rejoice if he could see you now!"

"You old fool, would you like me to fondle them? They killed my father, they killed my grandfather, but I'm to exchange Christian kisses with them, am I? You can go to . . . you know where!" Mitka furiously pulled on the rein and rode his horse out of the wicket-gate.

"Don't swear, Mitka, you're young enough to be my son. And there's nothing between you and me, go in peace!"

Turning even paler, and shaking his whip threateningly, Mitka shouted thickly:

"Don't cause me to sin, don't force me to! I'm sorry for Natalya, otherwise I'd show you, you merciful one. . . . I know you! I see you through and through, I see the sort of spirit you breathe out! You didn't retreat across the Donets, did you? You went over to the Reds, didn't you? That's just it! You all ought to be treated like the Koshevois, you sons of bitches! Come on, boys! Well, you lame cur, mind you don't fall into my hands! If you do, you won't get away again! And I shall remember your hospitality to me. I've raised my fist against my own kinsmen before now!"

With trembling hands Pantelei shut the wicket-gate and bolted it, then limped into the house.

"I've driven your brother away," he said to Natalya, not looking at her.

She said nothing, although in her heart she agreed with her father-in-law's step. But Ilyinichna swiftly crossed herself and said in a happier tone:

"And glory be! He's gone for good! Forgive me what I'm saying, Natalya dear, but your Mitka has

turned out a real scoundrel. He's found himself a fine job! Look at him! Not serving like other Cossacks in the real forces! Joining the punitives! And is that the Cossacks' task to be executioners, to hang old women, and to cut down innocent children with their sabres? Are they responsible for Misha's doings? Why, at that rate the Reds might have sabred me and you, and Mishatka and Polyushka, for Grisha's doings. But they didn't; they had mercy. No, God forbid; I don't agree with such goings on."

"Nor do I defend my brother, Mother," was all Natalya said as she wiped away her tears with the corner of her kerchief.

Mitka rode out of the village that same day. Rumour said that he rejoined his punitive detachment somewhere near Kargin'skaya and went off with it to bring order to the Ukrainian settlements of the Donets Region, whose population had been accused of helping to suppress the upper Don rising.

After Mitka's departure he was the subject of discussion in the village for a whole week. The majority of the people condemned his arbitrary butchery of the Koshevoi family. The bodies were buried out of communal resources; attempts were made to sell the little hut, but no purchaser was to be found. On the order of the village ataman, boards were nailed across the shutters; and for long after, the children were afraid to play around that fearful spot, and when they passed the hut old men and women crossed themselves and prayed for the peace of the murdered ones' souls.

Then the time arrived for the steppe haymaking, and these recent events were forgotten.

The village was absorbed as before in work and in rumours of the front. Those of the farmers who had managed to save their working animals groaned and cursed as they supplied wagons and animals for communal services. Almost every day bullocks and horses had to be taken from the fields and sent to the district centre. As the old men unharnessed the horses from the mowing machines they often cursed the long-drawn-out war. But shells, cartridges, reels of barbed wire, foodstuffs had to be carted to the front. And they carted them. But now, as though to spite them, such fine days had set in that all they wanted was to mow and rake the ripe, juicy grass.

Pantelei made ready for the mowing and grew furiously angry with Darya. She had driven off with the yoke of bullocks to carry cartridges. She was to have returned from the transshipment point, but a week passed and still there was no news of her. And without the yoke of old, thoroughly reliable bullocks nothing could be done in the steppe.

To tell the truth, he should not have sent Darya. . . . His heart had been filled with foreboding when he had entrusted the bullocks to her, for he knew how fain she was to pass her time merrily, and how negligent she was of the animals. But there was no one else to send. Dunya could not go, for it was no maiden's work to drive with strange Cossacks on a long journey. Natalya had the little children to see to, and surely it wasn't for the old man himself to take those accursed cartridges. But Darya willingly answered the call. She had already driven with the greatest of satisfaction to all kinds of places: to the mill, or on some

other task connected with the farm, and all simply because she felt far more free outside the house. Every journey brought her amusement and pleasure. She escaped from her mother-in-law's control, she could gossip to her heart's content with other women, and, as she said, could "have a bit of love on the road" with any dissolute Cossack who happened to glance her way. At home, even after Pyotr's death, the strict Ilyinichna allowed her no freedom, as though Darya, who had been false to her husband while he was alive, was bound to be true to him now he was dead!

Pantelei knew that the bullocks would not be looked after properly, but there was nothing else to be done; he sent his elder daughter-in-law on the journey. But he lived all the ensuing week in the greatest of anxiety and mental unrest. "My old bullocks are done for," he thought more than once, waking up in the middle of the night and sighing deeply.

Darya returned in the morning of the eleventh day after her departure. Pantelei had just come home from the fields. He was mowing together with Anikushka's wife, and had left her and Dunya in the steppe to return to the village for water and provisions. The old people and Natalya were having breakfast when the familiar clatter of britzka wheels sounded past the window. Natalya nimbly ran to the window and saw Darya, wrapped up to her eyes, leading in the tired, emaciated bullocks.

"Is it she?" the old man asked, choking over a piece of food swallowed too quickly.

"Yes."

"I never expected to see the bullocks again. Well,

glory be to God! The accursed slut! She's drifted in at last!" the old man muttered, crossing himself and belching contentedly.

Darya unyoked the bullocks and went into the kitchen, laid the folded horse-rug on the threshold, and greeted the others.

"But why so soon, my dear? You could have spent another week on the road!" Pantelei said angrily, looking at Darya from under his brows and ignoring her greeting.

"You should have gone yourself!" she snapped, removing her dusty kerchief from her head.

"Why were you gone so long?" Ilyinichna joined in the conversation, in order to take off the chillness of the reception.

"They wouldn't let me go, so I couldn't help it."

Pantelei shook his head distrustfully and asked:

"They let Christonya's wife come back, so why didn't they let you?"

"Well, they didn't!" Darya's eyes glittered angrily, and she added: "If you don't believe me, ride and ask the man who was in charge of the wagons."

"I've got no reason to go and ask about you, but the next time you stay at home! Death is the only thing you can be sent for."

"Now you're threatening me! Yes, you are! I won't go in any case. Even if you send me I won't go!"

"Are the bullocks all right?" the old man asked more amicably.

"Yes. Nothing's happened to your bullocks ..."

Darya answered reluctantly, and looked blacker than night.

"She's had to part from some lover of hers on the road, and that's why she's so cross," Natalya thought. She always had a feeling of pity and distaste about Darya and her unclean amorous adventures.

After breakfast Pantelei made ready to drive off; but at that moment the village ataman arrived.

"I'd wish you a good journey, but wait a minute, Pantelei Prokofyevich, don't go off!" he said.

"You haven't come for a wagon again, have you?" the old man said in an exaggeratedly submissive tone, though he was well-nigh choking with fury.

"No, it's something else this time. The commander of the whole Don Army, General Sidorin himself, is coming here today. You understand? I've just received a document by courier from the district ataman, ordering all the old men and the women down to the very last to assemble for a meeting."

"Haven't they got any sense?" Pantelei shouted. "Who's going to organize a village assembly at such a busy time? Is your General Sidorin going to provide me with hay for the winter?"

"He'll provide you with as much as he'll provide me," the ataman replied calmly. "What I'm ordered to do, that I do. Unharness your animals! We must welcome him hospitably. They say, by the way, that Allied generals are travelling with him."

Pantelei stood by the wagon for a moment, thinking it over, then began to unharness the bullocks. Seeing his remarks had taken effect, the ataman cheered up and asked:

"Is there any chance of borrowing your mare?"

"What do you want her for?"

"They've ordered us, may they sit on a hedgehog, to send two troikas as far as Durnoi Dell to meet them. But where I'm to get the tarantasses and horses I've no idea! I was up and running about before dawn; I've soaked my shirt five times, and still I've only got hold of four horses. Everybody's out at work, and you can shout as much as you like. . . ."

The mollified Pantelei agreed to let the ataman have his mare, and even offered his small, springed tarantass. After all, it was the commander-in-chief of the army who was coming, and foreign generals with him, too, and Pantelei had always had a feeling of fluttering respect for generals.

The endeavours of the ataman resulted at last in the assembly of two troikas, which were sent off to Durnoi Dell to meet the honoured guests. The people gathered in the square. Many of them left their hay-making to hurry in from the steppe.

Turning his back on the work, Pantelei dressed himself up, put on a clean shirt, striped cloth trousers, and the cap which Grigory had once brought home as a present for him. Then he limped off sedately to the market square, after ordering his old wife to send Darya out with water and food for Dunya.

Soon a heavy cloud of dust was whirling up along the track towards the village; through the dust something metallic gleamed, and from afar came the tooting of a motor horn. The guests were riding in two new and gleaming dark-blue cars; driving past the mowers returning home from the steppe, the empty troikas bounced along far behind them, and the postal bells, which the ataman had acquired for this solemn oc-

casion, tinkled dismally under the yokes. There was a perceptible stir among the crowd in the square, a hum of talk arose, and children's merry shouts. The distracted ataman darted about among the crowd, collecting the worthy elders who were to be entrusted with the presentation of bread and salt. His eye fell on Pantelei, and he gladly seized on him:

"Help me out, for Christ's sake! You're a man of experience, you know the ropes.... You know how to hob-nob with them and all that sort of thing.... And besides, you're a member of the regional administration, and your son's a— Please take the bread and salt, for I've always been a nervous sort, and I'm all trembling at the knees."

Flattered beyond words by this honour, Pantelei refused at first, for decency's sake; then, seeming to draw his head down between his shoulders, he swiftly crossed himself and took the platter with its bread and salt and embroidered hand-towel. Elbowing the crowd aside, he stepped to the front.

Accompanied by a drove of hoarsely barking dogs of all kinds, the cars swiftly approached the square.

"How do you feel? You're not nervous?" the pale-faced ataman inquired of Pantelei. It was the first time he had ever seen such important personages. Pantelei flashed a sidelong glance at him and said in a voice husky with agitation:

"Here, hold this while I comb my beard! Take it!"

The ataman submissively took the platter, while Pantelei smoothed his moustache and beard and youthfully flung out his chest; then, resting on the tips of the toes of his maimed leg, to hide his deformity, he

again took the platter. But it shook so violently in his hands that the ataman anxiously inquired:

"You won't drop it, will you? Oh, look out!"

Pantelei shrugged his shoulders with the utmost contempt. He drop it! Could any man talk such nonsense? He, a member of the regional administration, he who had been on handshaking terms with everybody in the Governor's palace, suddenly to be afraid of some general! This wretched little ataman had gone right out of his mind!

"My brother, when I was in the army council, I had tea with sugar in it with the vice-ataman himself . . ." Pantelei began. But the words froze on his lips.

The leading car halted about a dozen paces away. A clean-shaven chauffeur in a cap with a large peak and narrow non-Russian shoulder-straps on his tunic nimbly jumped out and opened the door. Two officers dressed in khaki alighted gravely and made their way towards the crowd. They walked straight towards Pantelei and he drew himself up rigidly to attention. He guessed that these modestly dressed people must be the generals, and that those who came behind and were dressed more finely were simply members of their suite. But where were the generals' solid epaulets? Where the shoulder-knots and medals? And what sort of generals were these, if they were quite undistinguishable from ordinary military clerks?

The old man stared without blinking at the approaching guests, and his look revealed more and more open amazement. All of a sudden he was bitterly disillusioned. He even felt affronted, both because of his solemn preparations for the meeting and also

because these generals were a disgrace to the very title of general. Damn it, if he had known this was the kind of general that was going to turn up, he wouldn't have dressed himself so carefully, and wouldn't have waited for them with such a tremor of expectation, and in any case wouldn't have stood like a fool, with a platter in his hands, and on it bread badly baked by some snotty-nosed old woman. No, Pantelei Prokofyevich had never been a laughing-stock in the people's eyes, but now that had happened. A moment ago he had heard the children giggling behind his back, and one little devil even shouted at the top of his voice: "Boys, look how old hoppy Melekhov has given himself a pain! He looks as though he'd swallowed a brush!" If only there had been good reason for enduring the jeers and straining his lame leg! Everything inside Pantelei was bubbling with indignation. And this accursed coward of an ataman was the cause of it all! He had come and gabbled away, taken the mare and the tarantass, and had run all over the village with his tongue hanging out, looking for bells for the troikas. In truth the man who has never seen anything worth seeing is glad at the sight of a rag! In all his life Pantelei had never seen such generals! Take the Imperial review, for instance: you'd see a man marching along with his chest covered with medals, and wearing gold lace. It did your heart good to look at him; he was an icon, not a general! But these, all that greenish stuff, like jackdaws. One of them hadn't even got a proper cap with a peak, as he should have when in dress uniform, but a kind of bowler hat under a net, and his face was shaved quite

bare; you couldn't have found one little hair, even if you'd searched with a lantern. . . . Pantelei's face clouded and he all but spat with disgust. But someone gave him a hard jog in the back and whispered in a loud voice:

"Go on, take it to them. . . ."

He stepped forward. Looking over his head, General Sidorin ran his eyes around the crowd and uttered in a ringing voice:

"Greetings, worthy elders!"

"We wish you health, Your Excellency!" the villagers shouted in a ragged chorus.

The general graciously accepted the bread and salt from Pantelei's hands, said "Thank you," and passed the platter to his adjutant.

The tall, wiry British colonel in a tropical helmet tilted low over his eyes surveyed the Cossacks with cold curiosity. He had received orders from General Briggs, head of the British military mission in the Caucasus, to accompany Sidorin on a tour of inspection of the Don territory that had been cleared of the Bolsheviks, and with the help of an interpreter was conscientiously studying the mood of the Cossacks and at the same time acquainting himself with the situation at the front.

Weary though he was of the hardships of travel, the monotonous steppe landscape, the tedious conversation and all the complex responsibilities incumbent upon a representative of a Great Power, the colonel placed the interests of king and country first. He listened attentively to the speech of the local orator and understood nearly everything, for although he con-

cealed the fact from others, he was well acquainted with the Russian language.

With true British condescension he looked at the diverse faces of these warlike sons of the steppe, struck by the mixture of racial qualities that always impresses one on observing a Cossack crowd; side by side with a blond Cossack of Slavonic origin stood a typical Mongol, and next to the latter a young crow-black Cossack with his arm in a sling, chatting in low tones to a grey-haired patriarch who looked as if he had come straight out of the Bible. The colonel could have wagered anything that the grey-bearded patriarch, leaning on his staff and dressed in an old-fashioned waisted Cossack coat, had the purest blood of Caucasian highlanders in his veins.

The colonel knew something about history and, as he surveyed the Cossacks, he reflected that neither these barbarians nor their grandchildren would ever march into India under the command of some new Platonov. After victory over the Bolsheviks, Russia, bled white by civil war, would for long remain a nonentity among the Great Powers and Britain's possessions in the East would be safe for many decades to come. The colonel was firmly convinced that the Bolsheviks would be defeated. He was a man of sober reason; before the war he had lived for many years in Russia and naturally he could not conceive how the ideas of communism could triumph in this semi-barbaric country.

His attention wandered to the women whispering loudly among themselves. Without turning his head, he eyed their broad weather-beaten faces and a barely

perceptible smile of contempt hovered on his tightly compressed lips.

After handing over the bread and salt Pantelei fell back to mix with the crowd. He did not stop to listen while some Vyeshenskaya orator welcomed the visitors in the name of the Cossack population of the Vyeshenskaya District, but made his way to the troikas standing a little distance off.

The horses were covered with foam, and their flanks were sunken. The old man went up to his mare, rubbed her nostrils with his sleeve, and sighed. He felt like cursing, unharnessing the mare at once, and leading her home, so great was his disillusionment.

Meanwhile General Sidorin was making a speech to the inhabitants of Tatarsky. Referring with approval to their militant activities in the rear of the Reds, he said:

"You have fought valiantly against our common enemies. Your services will not be forgotten by your native land, which is gradually being liberated from the Bolsheviks, from their terrible yoke. I should like to present tokens of our gratitude to those women of your village who, as we know, were especially prominent in the armed struggle against the Reds. I ask our Cossack heroines whose names will be announced in a minute to step forward."

One of the officers read out a short list. The first name was that of Darya Melekhova, the others were widows of Cossacks killed at the beginning of the rising, women who had participated, like Darya, in the massacre of the Communist prisoners driven to Tatarsky after the surrender of the Serdobsky Regiment.

Darya had not driven out to the fields, as Pantelei had ordered her. She proved to be on the square, among the crowd of villagers, all dressed up in holiday attire, and the moment she heard her name called out, she pushed the women aside and boldly walked to the front, tidying her white, lace-edged kerchief as she went, half closing her eyes, and smiling a little with embarrassment. Tired as she was after her journey and amorous adventures, she was still devilishly good to look at. Her pale cheeks, untouched by sunburn, reflected the hot glitter of her questing eyes, and in the wilful curl of her painted eyebrows and in the fold of her smiling lips lurked something challenging and impure.

Her way was barred by an officer standing with his back to the crowd. She gently pushed him aside, saying:

"Let a soldier's widow pass!"

And she went right up to Sidorin.

He took the medal with its St. George ribbon from the adjutant and, with fumbling fingers, pinned it to the left breast of Darya's jacket, gazing with a smile into her eyes.

"So you're the widow of Cornet Melekhov, who was killed in March?"

"Yes."

"In a moment you will be given a monetary reward, five hundred rubles. This officer will give it to you. The military ataman Afrikan Petrovich Bogayevsky and the Government of the Don express their thanks to you for the great valour you have shown, and ask

you to accept their sympathy. . . . They deeply sympathize with you in your sorrow."

Darya did not understand all the general said to her. She thanked him with a nod of her head, took the money from the adjutant's hand, and, smiling silently, gazed straight into the eyes of the still youthful general. They were almost of the same height, and Darya examined the general's gaunt face without much constraint. "They've valued my Pyotr cheap, at no more than the cost of a yoke of bullocks. But he's not bad-looking, this general, quite passable," she was thinking with her native cynicism. Sidorin waited, expecting her to go; but she still lingered. The adjutant and other officers standing behind him raised their eyebrows, drawing one another's attention to the sprightly widow; their eyes twinkled merrily. Even the British colonel came to life, straightened his belt, shifted from one foot to the other, and something faintly resembling a smile appeared on his ascetic face.

"May I go?" Darya asked.

"Why, yes, of course," Sidorin responded hurriedly.

With an awkward movement Darya thrust the money into the open collar of her blouse and went back to the crowd. Weary with speeches and ceremonies, the officers closely followed her light, gliding walk.

Martin Shamil's widow approached Sidorin uncertainly. When the medal was pinned to her old blouse she broke into tears, so unceremonious and so femininely bitter that the officers' faces at once lost their amused expressions and grew serious, sympathetically sour.

"So your husband was killed too?" Sidorin asked, his face clouding.

The weeping woman covered her face with her hands and nodded silently.

"She's got so many children, you couldn't get them all into one wagon," a Cossack remarked in a deep voice.

Sidorin turned to the Englishman:

"We are rewarding women who showed exceptional courage in fighting the Bolsheviki. Most of them lost their husbands at the beginning of the uprising against the Bolsheviki and in revenge for the death of their husbands these widows destroyed a whole detachment of local Communists. The woman I first decorated killed a Communist commissar, famous for his cruelty, with her own hands."

The interpreter spoke hurriedly in English. The colonel listened with his head lowered and said: "I admire the courage of these women. Tell me, General, did they take part in battle under the same conditions as the men?"

"Yes," Sidorin answered shortly and with an impatient gesture beckoned to the third widow.

Shortly afterwards the guests departed for the district centre. The people hurriedly began to disperse, hastening to get on with the mowing, and soon after the cars, escorted by a horde of barking dogs, had disappeared, only three old gaffers were left standing by the church fence.

"Strange times these are!" one of them said, throwing out his arms expansively. "In the old days when there was a war on they gave the Cross of St. George

or a medal for really big deeds, for heroism. And the men they gave them to! The most daring, the most desperate! There weren't many who risked it. And it wasn't for nothing that the people spoke of death or glory. But these days they've started giving medals to women. It wouldn't be so bad if the women had done anything, but the Cossacks drove prisoners into the village, and the women killed the prisoners, unarmed men, with stakes. Where's the heroism in that? I don't understand, God forgive me!"

Another weak-sighted and feeble old man planted one foot aside, slowly drew a rolled cloth wallet out of his pocket, and said:

"The authorities can see better from Novocherkassk. I expect they reasoned it out this way: the women have got to have something to attract them as well, so as to raise everybody's spirits, so everybody should fight better. Here's a medal, and here's five hundred rubles; what woman could say no to such an honour? Some of the Cossacks might not want to go to the front, some of them might want to keep safely out of the war, but could they stay at home now? Their wives would scorch their ears for them. The night cuckoo always cuckoos the loudest. And every woman will begin to think: 'Maybe they'll pin a medal on me.'"

"You're talking nonsense, Cousin Fyodor," the third man objected. "They deserved to be rewarded, and so they were rewarded. The women are left widows, the money will be a great help to them on their farms, and the medals have been given them for their bravery. Darya Melekhova was the first to condemn Kotlyarov

to death, and quite right, too! The Lord is the judge of them all, but you can't blame the women: blood's thicker than water. . . ."

The old gaffers argued and swore away until the church bell rang for vespers. The moment the sexton struck the bell, all three rose, removed their caps, crossed themselves, and decorously entered the church enclosure.

XIII

It was astonishing how life had changed in the Melekhov family. Not long ago Pantelei Prokofyevich had felt himself the all-powerful master of the house, and every member of the family had obeyed him unconditionally; the work was carried on by all jointly, they shared their joys and their sorrows, and a strong, abiding harmony influenced all their existence. The family had been firmly welded together in one. Yet since that last spring everything had changed. Dunya was the first to break away. She did not openly disobey her father, but she did any work that fell to her with obvious reluctance, and as though she were not working for herself, but for hire. Outwardly she grew very reserved, alienated from the others; and her care-free laugh was rarely heard nowadays.

After Grigory's departure for the front, Natalya also grew less intimate with the old people. She spent almost all her time with the children, talked freely only with them, and occupied herself with them, and it seemed as though she were quietly but deeply grieving over something. But not by a single word did she share

her sorrow with any other member of the family; she complained to nobody and kept her burden entirely to herself.

As for Darya, she changed completely after her journey with the wagon and bullocks. She contradicted her father-in-law more and more frequently, paid no attention whatever to Ilyinichna, was cross with everybody for no apparent cause, avoided taking part in the hay-making on the score of sickness, and behaved as though she had only a few more days to spend in the Melekhov house.

Before Pantelei's very eyes the family was breaking up. He and his old wife were left alone. The family ties had been destroyed swiftly and unexpectedly; the warmth of their relationships was gone; touches of irritation and hostility crept more and more frequently into their conversation. They did not sit down at the common table as in former times, like a single, friendly family, but like people who happened to find themselves together by chance.

The war was the cause of it all; Pantelei realized that well enough. Dunya was annoyed with her parents because they had robbed her of the hope of marrying Misha Koshevoi, the one man whom she loved with all the intensity of her virgin passion. With her native secrecy Natalya was silently and deeply suffering because of Grigory's latest entanglement with Aksinya. Pantelei saw it all, but he could do nothing to restore the old order in his family. After all that had occurred he simply could not give his consent to his daughter's marriage with an inveterate Bolshevik; and besides, what use would it be if he did consent,

seeing that the devil of a bridegroom was dashing about somewhere at the front, and in the Red Army into the bargain? The same applied to Grigory: if he hadn't been wearing officer's uniform Pantelei would have dealt properly with him! He would have dealt with him so thoroughly that afterwards Grigory would not even have squinted at the Astakhovs' yard. But the war had spoiled everything and robbed the old man of the possibility of living and ruling his house as he desired. The war had ruined him, had robbed him of his former zest for work, had taken his elder son from him, had brought discord and disorder into his family. It had passed over his life like a storm over ripened wheat; yet even after a storm the wheat rises again and is beautiful under the sun, but now the old man could not rise. He mentally let everything slide. So be it!

Darya cheered up after receiving her award from the hands of General Sidorin. She returned excited and happy from the square. Her eyes glittering, she showed Natalya the medal.

"What did you get that for?" Natalya asked in amazement.

"That's for my cousin Ivan Alexeyevich, may he rest in peace, the son of a bitch! And this is for Pyotr." With a flourish she unfolded the packet of crackling Don credit notes.

But even then Darya did not go out to the fields. Pantelei wanted to send her out with food, but she flatly refused:

"Let me be, Father, I'm worn out after the journey."

The old man's face clouded. To soften her rough refusal, Darya said half-jokingly:

"On such a day it's a sin for you to force me to go out to the fields. Today's a holiday for me."

"I'll take the food myself," the old man agreed. "Well, and what about the money?"

"What about the money?" Darya raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"I ask, what are you intending to do with the money?"

"That's my affair. I'll do what I like with it."

"But that is ... what do you mean? Didn't they give you the money for Pyotr?"

"They gave it to me, and it's not for you to dispose of it."

"But are you one of the family or what?"

"And what do you want of this one of the family, Father? To take the money for yourself?"

"I don't mean the lot; but was Pyotr our son or not, in your view? The old woman and I ought to have a share, shouldn't we?"

The old man's claims were made in an obviously uncertain tone, and Darya resolutely took the upper hand. In a contemptuously calm voice she said:

"I shan't give you anything; I shan't even give you a ruble! You've got no share in this, or he'd have put it in your hand. And why are you kicking up a fuss about your share? No one said anything about shares, and you needn't stretch your hand out for my money, you won't get it!"

Then Pantelei made his last attempt.

"You live with us, you eat our bread, and that

means that everything ought to be in common. What sort of order will there be if each begins to run his own affairs separately? I won't allow that!" he said.

But Darya repulsed this final attempt to take possession of money which belonged to her. Smiling shamelessly, she announced:

"I'm not married to you, Father. I live with you today, but tomorrow I shall get married, and then you'll be glad to see the last of me! And I'm not bound to pay you for my food. I've worked ten years for your family, never straightening my back."

"You've worked for yourself, you sinful hussy!" Pantelei shouted indignantly. He shouted something else also, but Darya did not stop to listen to him. Sweeping up the edge of her skirt, she swung round right under his nose and went off to the best room. "He tried it on the wrong woman!" she whispered, with a sneering smile.

There the conversation ended. And, truly, Darya was not the one to yield her rights out of fear of the old man's anger.

Pantelei made ready to drive off to the fields, but before his departure he had a short talk with Ilyichna.

"You keep an eye on Darya!" he ordered.

"Why, what am I to keep an eye on her for?" Ilyichna asked in astonishment.

"Why, just in case she packs up and leaves home, and takes some of our property with her. It looks to me as if she isn't spreading her wings for nothing. . . . It's clear she's found a young man for herself, and one of these fine days she'll be getting married."

"You may be right," Ilyinichna agreed with a sigh. "She lives like any khokhol on the outskirts of the village; nothing pleases her, everything's all wrong for her. . . . These days she's off from the rest of us, and, no matter how much you try, you can't stick a piece of bread back on the loaf again."

"There's no reason why we should try to stick her on again! You old fool, don't think of holding her back if she talks about it. Let her leave the house. I've had enough of having to handle her!" Pantelei climbed on to the wagon; as he prodded the bullocks he ended: "She keeps away from work like a dog from flies, but she's always trying to get the best piece for herself and to have a good time. Now Pyotr's gone, God rest his soul, we don't want to keep the likes of her in the family. She's not a woman, she's a creeping disease!"

The old people's assumptions were mistaken. Darya was not even thinking of getting another husband. She was not thinking of married life, she had another burden on her mind. . . .

All that day she was sociable and gay. Even the dispute over the money had no effect on her spirits. She spent a long time twisting and turning before the mirror, examining the medal from all angles; she dressed and redressed herself five times, to see which jacket the striped St. George ribbon most suited, and joked: "Now I ought to win some more crosses." Then she called Ilyinichna into the best room, pushed two twenty-ruble notes into her palm and, pressing the old woman's knotted hand to her breast with her own burning hands, whispered: "That's for prayers for Pyotr. Order masses for him, and boil some porridge

to give the people at church." And she burst into tears. But a minute later, though her eyes were still glittering with tears, she was playing with Mishatka, flinging her silk holiday shawl over him, and laughing as though she had never wept and never known the salty taste of tears in all her life.

She grew even more gay when Dunya returned from the fields. She told how she had been given the medal and jokingly imitated the solemn tone in which the general had spoken. Then saucily, surreptitiously winking at Natalya, she assured Dunya with a serious face that soon she, Darya, an officer's widow awarded the Cross of St. George, was to be raised to officer's rank and appointed to the command of a company of elderly Cossacks.

Natalya sat mending the children's shirts and listening to Darya, suppressing a smile. But Dunya was completely bewildered, and asked, folding her hands imploringly:

"Darya! Darya dear! Don't tell stories, for Christ's sake! For now I really don't know when you're telling stories and when you're telling the truth. Tell me all about it seriously."

"Don't you believe me? Well, then you must be a stupid girl! I'm telling you the simple truth. The officers are all at the front, and who's going to teach the old men how to march and all the things you have to know when you're a soldier? You wait till they're put under my command, and then I'll handle them, the old devils! This is how I shall command them!" Darya closed the door leading to the kitchen, to make sure her mother-in-law did not see her, then swiftly

tucked the edge of her skirt between her legs and, seizing it from the back with one hand, her bare, shining calves gleaming, she marched about the best room, halted close to Dunya, and gave orders in a chesty voice:

"Old men, at-tention! Hold your beards up there! Left wheel, quick march!"

Dunya could not control herself, and she burst into laughter, hiding her face in her hands. Through her laughter Natalya said:

"Oh, that's enough! No good will come of it!"

"So no good will come of it? And have you ever known any good in your life? If I don't make you laugh, you'll turn mouldy in this house!"

But Darya's outburst of gaiety ended as suddenly as it had begun. Half an hour later she retired to her little room, angrily tore the ill-boding medal from her breast, and flung it into the chest. Then, resting her cheeks on her hands, she sat a long time by the window. At night she slipped off somewhere or other and returned only after the first cockcrow.

After that she worked hard in the fields for four days.

The hay-making was in a sad way. There was a shortage of workers. Not more than four acres or so could be mowed in a day. The mown hay was soaked with rain, and that added to the work: the swaths had to be tossed and dried in the sun. And as soon as they were raked into cocks heavy rain fell again and continued from nightfall till dawn with autumn steadiness. Then fine weather set in, an eastern wind blew, the mowing machines again began to clatter out in

the steppe, a sweetish-bitter scent of mildew came from the blackened cocks, the steppe was enveloped in haze, and the indistinct outlines of the guardian mounds, the bluish slits of the ravines, and the green caps of the willows above the distant ponds emerged vaguely through the azure mist.

On the fourth day Darya made ready to go to the district centre straight from the fields. She announced her intention when they sat down in the field camp for the noonday break.

In a disgruntled, sneering tone Pantelei asked:

"Why all this hurry? Can't you wait till Sunday?"

"I've got business to do, and it won't wait."

"Not even one day?"

Through set teeth Darya answered:

"No."

"Well, if it's worrying you so much that you can't be the least bit patient, you go. But all the same, what is this urgent business you've got to see to? Can't we be told?"

"If you know everything you'll die before your time."

As usual, Darya did not mince her words, and, spitting with annoyance, Pantelei cut his questions short.

Next day, on her way back from the district centre, Darya turned aside to call at Tatarsky. Only Ilyinichna and the children were at home. Mishatka was about to run up to his aunt, but she coldly pushed him away and asked her mother-in-law:

"Where's Natalya, Mother?"

"She's in the vegetable plot, hoeing the potatoes.

What do you want her for? Has the old man sent for her? Let him fry, and tell him I said so."

"Nobody's sent for her; I had something I wanted to say to her."

"Did you come on foot?"

"Yes."

"Will our folk be finished soon?"

"Tomorrow, probably."

"But wait a bit, where are you flying off to? Has the rain spoilt much of the hay?" the old woman pestered Darya with questions as she went down the steps.

"No, not much. Well, I'm going, I haven't got time...."

"Drop in on your way back from the garden, and pick up a shirt for the old man. Do you hear...?"

Darya pretended she had not heard and hurriedly made her way to the cattle-yard. By the landing-place at the river edge she halted and, half closing her eyes, looked at the green expanse of the Don. The freshly humid air above the river struck a chill into her. She slowly made her way along the bank to the gardens.

A light breeze played over the Don, sea-gulls were wheeling. The waves crawled lazily up the sloping bank. Enveloped in a transparent lilac haze, the chalky hills gleamed faintly under the sun, and the rain-washed forest on the farther bank showed youthfully and freshly green, as in early spring.

Darya removed her shoes from her aching feet, washed her legs, and sat a long time on the bank, on the burning shingle. Shading her eyes from the sun

with her palm she listened to the sea-gulls' yearning cries, to the measured lap, lap of the water. She was moved to tears at the stillness, at the heart-rending cries of the gulls; and the misfortune which had so unexpectedly come upon her seemed still more burdensome and bitter.

Natalya straightened her back with difficulty, leaned her mattock against the wattle fence, and, noticing Darya, went to meet her.

"Do you want me, Darya?"

"I've come to you with my trouble...."

They sat down side by side. Natalya took off her kerchief, tidied her hair, and glanced expectantly at Darya. She was amazed at the change which had occurred in Darya's face during the past few days: her cheeks were sunken and grey, a deep frown knitted her forehead, there was a feverish, anxious glitter in her eyes.

"What's the matter with you? You've gone quite dark in the face," Natalya asked sympathetically.

"You'd go dark in my place." Darya forced a smile, then was silent. "Have you got much more to hoe?"

"I'll be finished by evening. But what has happened to you?"

Darya swallowed convulsively and answered in a quick mutter:

"I'll tell you what. I'm ill. I've got a filthy disease.... I caught it when I went on that last journey.... Some accursed officer gave it to me!"

"So you've paid for your pleasure!" Natalya clapped her hands in fear and distress.

"Yes, I've paid for it. . . . And there's nothing to be said, and nobody to complain of. . . . It's just my weakness. . . . The swine made up to me, soft-soaped me. . . . He had white teeth, but he was rotten inside. . . . And now I'm finished!"

"Poor darling! But now what? Now what are you going to do?" Natalya stared at Darya with dilated eyes, while Darya, gazing down at her feet, recovered her composure and went on more calmly:

"You see, even on the way back I began to notice things. At first I thought maybe it was just . . . you know yourself that women have all sorts of troubles. Last spring I lifted a sack of wheat from the ground, and it made me bleed for three weeks. Well, but afterwards I realized that it wasn't quite the same this time. . . . The signs appeared. . . . And yesterday I went to see the doctor at the district centre. I could have died with shame. . . . But it's all over now. . . . The good girl has got her reward!"

"You must get cured of it, only it's such a disgrace. They say that sort of disease can be cured."

"No, girl, you can't cure mine." Darya smiled wryly, and she lifted her burning eyes for the first time during the talk. "I've got syphilis, and there's no cure for that. Your nose drops off with that. . . . Like old Mother Andronikha—have you ever seen her?"

"Now what will you do?" Natalya asked in a weeping voice, and her eyes filled with tears.

Darya sat silent for a long time. She tore a convolvulus flower from the maize stalk around which it had entwined itself, and raised it close to her eyes.

The tender, rosy-fringed trumpet of the tiny flower, so translucently light, almost imponderable, gave off the heavy, fleshy perfume of sun-drenched earth. Darya stared at it eagerly and curiously, as though she had never seen the common little flower before, smelled it with twitching nostrils, then laid it carefully on the wind-dried, crumbling earth and said:

"What shall I do, you ask? As I came back from the district centre I was thinking and planning all the way. . . . I'll lay hands on myself; that's what I'll do. It's a pity, but there seems to be no other way out. It doesn't matter if I do try to get cured, everybody in the village will find out; they'll all point their finger at me, they'll all turn their backs and laugh. Who will want me in the state I am now? My beauty will fade, I shall go all withered, I shall rot alive. . . . And I don't want that!" She spoke as though she were discussing the question with herself and paid no heed to Natalya's gesture of protest. "Before I went to Vyeshenskaya I thought that if I had got a filthy disease I'd get cured. And that's why I didn't give Father the money; I thought it would come in useful to pay the doctors. . . . But now I've changed my mind. And I'm fed up with it all. I don't want to get cured."

Darya swore a terrible, masculine oath, spat, and with the back of her hand wiped away a tear hanging on her long eye-lashes.

"The things you're saying! You ought to be afraid of God . . ." Natalya said quietly.

"God—He's no use to me now. As it is, He's got in my way all my life. . . ." Darya smiled; and in

that smile, mischievous and sly, for one second Natalya recognized the old Darya. "You couldn't do this, and you couldn't do that; everybody frightened you out of sinning with talk of the Day of Judgement. . . . But you couldn't think of anything more terrible than the judgement I'm going to carry out on myself. I'm fed up with it all, Natalya. Everybody's turned horrible. . . . It'll be easy for me to do away with myself. I've got nobody behind me or before me. And nobody to tear out of my heart. . . . But it's true!"

Natalya argued ardently; pleaded with Darya to think it over and to put the thought of suicide out of her mind. But Darya, who listened abstractedly at first, collected herself and angrily interrupted:

"Drop all that, Natalya! I haven't come here for you to talk me out of it and plead with me. I came to tell you about my trouble and to warn you that from today on, you mustn't let your children come near me. My disease is catching, so the doctor says, and I've heard say it is myself, and I don't want them to catch it from me. Don't you see, stupid? And you tell the old woman, I haven't got the courage. . . . But I,—I'm not going to put my head in a noose at once, don't think that; there's plenty of time for that. . . . I'll live a little longer and enjoy myself in the world, taking my farewell of it. You know what we're like. So long as there's no tugging at our heart we go on blindly. . . . Look at the life I've lived. I've been sort of blind; but as I was coming back from Vyeshenskaya along by the Don, and as I thought that soon I would have to leave all this, it was as though my eyes had been opened. I looked at the Don, and

it was all rippling, and in the sunlight it was pure silver, and dancing so that it made my eyes smart to look at it. I turned all round and looked. . . . Lord, how beautiful it all was! And yet I'd never noticed it before. . . ." Darya smiled shamefacedly and was silent. She clenched her fists and, choking down the sob that rose in her throat, began to speak again, in a still higher and more strained voice. "On the way here I'd cried more than once. . . . And as I came near the village I looked and saw the children bathing in the river. . . . And as I looked at them my heart suddenly ached, and I started crying, like a fool. I lay a couple of hours on the sand to get over it. It's not easy for me if I stop to think. . . ."

She rose from the ground, shook out her skirt, and with a habitual movement adjusted the kerchief on her head.

"The only joy I get when I think of death is that in the next world I shall see Pyotr again. . . . 'Well!' I shall say, 'my old friend, Pyotr Panteleyevich, take back your wanton wife.'" With her customary cynical facetiousness she added: "But he won't be able to beat me in that world; they don't let quarrelsome ones into heaven, do they? Well, good-bye, Natalya dear! Don't forget to tell Mother about my trouble."

Natalya sat covering her eyes with her dusty palms. Between her fingers tears glittered like resin in splinters of pine. Darya reached the plaited wattle gate, then turned and said in a businesslike tone:

"From today on I shall eat from separate dishes. Tell Mother so. Oh, yes, and one other thing: tell her she's not to say anything to Father about it, or

the old man will go mad and turn me out of the house. And that would be the last straw. I'm going straight out to the mowing now. Good-bye!"

XIV

The mowers returned from the steppe next day. Pantelei decided to start carting in the hay after dinner. Dunya drove the bullocks down to the Don for water, and Ilyinichna and Natalya swiftly laid the table.

Darya came last to the table and sat down at the end. Ilyinichna set a small plate of cabbage soup before her, put a spoon and a piece of bread before her, and, as usual, poured the soup for the others into the one large, common bowl.

Pantelei stared at his wife in surprise, indicated Darya's plate with his eyes, and asked:

"What's all that? Why have you poured out her soup separate? Isn't she any longer of our faith?"

"What ever do you want? Get on with your food!"

The old man gave Darya a humorous look and smiled. "Aha! I understand! Since she's been given a medal she doesn't want to eat out of the common dish. What's the matter, Darya? Turning up your nose at supping out of the one bowl with us?"

"No, I'm not turning up my nose. I mustn't," Darya answered huskily.

"And why not?"

"My throat hurts."

"Well, and what of it?"

"I went to Vyeshenskaya to see the doctor, and he said I was to eat out of a separate dish."

"I had a sore throat once, but I didn't keep away from everybody else, and, glory be, I didn't give it to anybody else. So what sort of chill have you got?"

Darya turned pale, wiped her lips with her hand, and laid down her spoon. Angered by her husband's tactlessness, Ilyinichna shouted at him:

"What are you plaguing the woman for? We get no peace from you even at the table! He sticks like a bur, and there's no getting away from him!"

"But what's all the fuss about?" Pantelei barked irritably. "For all I care, you can do what you like!"

In his annoyance he poured a spoonful of hot soup into his throat, burned himself, and, spitting out the soup all over his beard, roared madly:

"You don't know how to serve up food properly, curse the lot of you! Who ever serves up soup straight from the fire?"

"If you were to talk less at the table the soup wouldn't burn you," Ilyinichna consoled him.

Dunya almost burst into laughter as she watched her father, his face a vivid purple, pick the cabbage and pieces of potato out of his beard. But everybody else was so straight-faced that she refrained and turned her eyes away, for fear of laughing at an awkward moment.

After dinner the old man and both his daughters-in-law drove off to bring in the hay. Pantelei passed the hay on a long pitchfork up to the wagon, while Natalya took the fusty-smelling pile and trod it down. She and Darya returned from the fields together. Pantelei had driven on far ahead with his old, long-striding bullocks.

The sun was setting behind the mound. The bitter wormwood scent arising from the mown steppe grew stronger towards evening, yet at the same time it grew milder, more pleasant, and lost the choking pungency it had had during the day. The heat was declining. The bullocks moved willingly and the heavy dust of the summer track thrown up by their hoofs rose and settled on the clumps of wayside thistles. The thistle heads with their flowering crimson crowns flamed brilliantly. Over them the bees were hovering. Lapwings flew off to a distant pond in the steppe, calling to one another as they went.

Darya lay face downward on the swaying wagon, resting on her elbows, occasionally glancing at Natalya. Lost in thought, Natalya was gazing at the sunset; coppery-crimson gleams roved over her calm, clear face. "But Natalya's happy; she's got a husband and children, there's nothing more she wants. Everybody in the family loves her. But as for me, I'm finished. When I die nobody will shed a tear." As Darya thought enviously of her sister-in-law she suddenly felt a desire stirring within her to embitter Natalya somehow, to cause her pain. Why had she, Darya, got to be the only one to struggle with attacks of despair, to think incessantly of her ruined life and suffer so cruelly? She took another swift glance at Natalya and said in a tone which she tried to make sound sincere:

"I want to make a confession to you, Natalya."

Natalya did not reply at once. Gazing at the sunset, she was recalling that day long ago when she was still Grigory's betrothed, and he had come to her home to

see her. When he left she had gone out to the gate to see him off. That day also the sunset had flamed, a raspberry-coloured afterglow had spread in the west, and the rooks had been calling in the willows. Grigory had ridden away half-turned in his saddle, and she had gazed after him through tears of joyous agitation and, pressing her hands to her pointed, virgin breasts, had felt the violent beating of her heart.... She was not pleased when Darya suddenly broke the silence, and she reluctantly asked:

"Why, what have you got to confess?"

"I've committed a sin.... Do you remember when Grigory came home from the front on leave? On the evening of that day, I remember, I was milking the cow. As I went to the hut I heard Aksinya calling me. Well, she called me over and gave me this little ring, simply forced it on me"—Darya turned the gold ring on her ring-finger—"and coaxed me into sending Grigory to her. Well, it was none of my business.... And I told him. All that night he.... Do you remember he said Kudinov had come and he had sat talking with him? It was all nonsense! He was with Aksinya."

Natalya sat benumbed, white-faced, silently breaking a dry piece of clover in her hands.

"Don't be angry with me, Natalya. I'm sorry now that I told you," Darya said humbly, trying to look into Natalya's eyes.

Natalya silently choked back her tears. So unexpected and oppressive was the sorrow which had again come upon her that she had no strength to answer

Darya and only turned away to hide her distorted face.

As they drove into the village Darya thought in her vexation with herself: "The devil must have egged me on to peck at her! Now she'll stream with tears for a whole month! I should have let her go on without knowing. It's better for such cows to live in their blindness." Desiring to soften the impression her words had made, she said:

"But don't you be too upset. What is there to sigh about? My trouble is heavier than yours, but I keep my chin up. And the devil knows—after all he might not have been with her at all really, perhaps he did go to see Kudinov. I didn't follow him. And if you're not caught you're not a thief."

"I guessed where he'd gone," Natalya said quietly, wiping her eyes with the corner of her kerchief.

"But if you guessed, why didn't you ask him about it? Ah, you good-for-nothing! He wouldn't have wriggled away from me! I'd have got him into such a corner that he'd have felt sick!"

"I was afraid to know the truth. . . . Do you think it's easy to bear?" Natalya said, stammering with emotion. Her eyes flashed. "You might have . . . lived like that with Pyotr. . . . But when I remember—when I remember all I've had to—had to go through—it's terrible to bear even now."

"Well, then, forget it all!" Darya naïvely counselled her.

"That's not the sort of thing you ever forget!" Natalya exclaimed in a strange, husky voice.

"I'd forget it! A lot of fuss over nothing!"

"You forget your disease!"

Darya burst into a laugh.

"I'd love to, but it won't let me, curse it! Listen, Natalya, if you like I'll find it all out from Aksinya. She'll tell me. God punish me! There isn't a woman alive who could keep quiet and not tell others who loves her and how. I know from my own case."

"I don't want your service! You've already done me one service!" Natalya answered dryly. "I'm not blind, I know why you told me all about it. It wasn't because you were sorry for me that you confessed, as you make out, you wanted to see me more unhappy...."

"You're right," Darya assented with a sigh. "But you judge for yourself: I'm not the only one who ought to suffer, am I?"

She slipped down from the wagon, took the bullock-rein in her hand, and led the wearily shambling animals down the hill. At the entrance to their lane she went up to the wagon and said:

"Natalya dear, there's one thing I want to ask you.... Do you love your man very much?"

"As best I can," Natalya answered indefinitely.

"So you do!" Darya sighed. "But I've never happened to love anyone very much. I've loved as a dog loves, here, there and everywhere. I wish I could have my life over again, I might live it different."

Black night followed the short summer gloaming. They stacked the hay in the yard in the darkness. The women worked without talking, and Darya made no retort even when Pantelei shouted at her.

XV

Vigorously pursuing the enemy as they fell back from Ust-Medveditskaya, the united forces of the Don Army and the upper Don insurgents moved northward. At Shashkin the broken regiments of the Ninth Red Army attempted to hold up the Cossacks, but they were driven out of their positions and again retreated almost to the Tsaritsin railway, without making any resolute stand.

Grigory and his division took part in the battle and rendered considerable assistance to General Sutulov's infantry brigade, which was attacked from the flank. Yermakov's mounted regiment, which Grigory ordered into the attack, captured some two hundred Red Army men, four machine-guns, and eleven ammunition wagons.

Late in the afternoon Grigory rode into Shashkin with a group of Cossacks belonging to the 1st Regiment. Close to the house occupied by the divisional staff a dense crowd of prisoners, glimmering white in their cotton shirts and pants, were guarded by half a squadron of Cossacks. The majority of the prisoners had been deprived of their boots and stripped to their underclothing, and only here and there a dirty khaki tunic showed a greenish hue among the general whiteness of the crowd.

"Why, they've gone as white as geese!" Prokhor Zykov exclaimed, pointing to the prisoners.

Grigory pulled on the reins and turned his horse sideways. Seeking out Yermakov in the crowd of Cossacks, he called him across:

"Ride closer; what are you hiding yourself behind other men's backs for?"

Coughing into his fist, Yermakov rode up. Blood was caked under his meagre black moustache, on his crushed lips; his right cheek was swollen and blue with fresh bruises. During the attack his horse had stumbled and fallen under him in full gallop; flying like a stone a good five paces, Yermakov had slid on his belly over the hummocky ground of a cornfield left fallow for the season. He and the horse jumped to their feet simultaneously. And a minute later Yermakov was in the saddle again. Capless, with blood streaming down his face, but with his bared sabre in his hand, he flew to overtake the flood of Cossack cavalry streaming down the slope.

"And why should I hide myself?" he asked with apparent surprise as he drew level with Grigory. His eyes were still aflame with the light of battle and suffused with blood. But he averted his gaze in embarrassment.

"The cat knows whose meat she's eaten! What are you riding behind me for?" Grigory asked angrily.

Yermakov forced a smile with his swollen lips and glanced at the prisoners.

"What meat are you talking about? Don't ask me your riddles now, I shan't guess them in any case. I fell off my horse head-first today...."

"Is that your work?" Grigory pointed at the prisoners with his whip.

Yermakov pretended that he had not noticed them before and assumed a boundless astonishment.

"Well, the sons of bitches! The damned rogues! They've stripped them! But when did they manage to do that? You wouldn't believe it! Why, I only left them a minute ago, after giving strict orders that they were not to be touched. And now look at them! They've stripped the poor devils clean!"

"Don't try to pull the wool over my eyes! What are you acting for? Did you give orders to strip them?"

"God forbid! Are you in your senses, Grigory Panteleyevich?"

"Do you remember my order?"

"You mean in regard to—"

"Yes, in regard to that!"

"Why, of course I remember. I remember it by heart. Like the poetry we used to learn at school."

Grigory involuntarily smiled. Leaning across his saddle, he seized Yermakov by the strap of his sword-belt. He was very fond of this daring, desperately brave commander.

"Kharlampy, no wriggling! Why did you allow it? The new colonel they've put in the staff in place of Kopylov will report it, and you'll have to answer for it. You won't be so glad when you're facing the music and it's nothing but questions and cross-examinations."

"I couldn't stand it, Panteleyevich!" Yermakov answered seriously and simply. "They were all dressed up in new things, they'd been issued new clothing in Ust-Medveditskaya, while my lads were going short; they haven't got much even at home. And they'd have been stripped when they got to the rear in any case. Have we got to capture them for the rear rats to

strip them? No, better that our men should have the use of the clothing. I shall answer for it, but they won't get much change out of me! And don't you come down on me! I know nothing about it and wasn't responsible even in my sleep!"

They drew level with the crowd of prisoners. The low murmur of talk died away. The men on the flanks made way for the horsemen, staring at them with sullen fear and anxious expectation. One Red Army man recognized Grigory as a commander and went right up to him, touching his stirrup with his hand:

"Comrade Commander! Tell your Cossacks to give us back our greatcoats at any rate. Have that much pity on us! It's cold at night, and we're stark naked, as you can see for yourself."

"I don't reckon you'll get frost-bite in the middle of summer, you suslik!" Yermakov replied harshly. Pushing the man aside with his horse, he turned to Grigory: "Don't you worry, I'll give orders for them to be allowed some of the old clothing. Now stand away, stand away, warriors! You should be killing the lice in your trousers and not fighting Cossacks!"

In the staff room the captured company commander was being examined. The new chief of staff, Colonel Andreyanov, was sitting behind a table covered with ancient oilcloth. Andreyanov was an elderly, snub-nosed man, with hair very grey at the temples, and large, childishly prominent ears. The Red commander stood in front of the table, a couple of paces away. The prisoner's statements were being taken down by one of the staff officers, Captain Sulin, who had been assigned to the division with Andreyanov.

The Red commander, a tall, fiery-moustached man with ashy-white hair cut so short that it bristled, stood shifting his bare feet on the ochre-painted floor, occasionally giving the colonel a swift glance. The Cossacks had left him only his soldier's undershirt of yellow, unbleached cotton, and in exchange for his own trousers had given him ragged and badly patched Cossack *sharovari* with faded stripes. As Grigory went over to the table he saw the prisoner make a swift, awkward attempt to cover his naked body, pulling his trousers, torn at the seat, around him.

"The Orel Provincial Military Commissariat, you say?" the colonel asked, swiftly glancing at the man over his spectacles. He lowered his eyes again and, half closing them, turned to examining a document in his hands.

"Yes."

"In the autumn of last year?"

"At the end of the autumn."

"You're lying!"

"I'm telling the truth."

"I repeat that you are lying!"

The man shrugged his shoulders and said nothing. The colonel looked at Grigory and said, nodding contemptuously in the prisoner's direction:

"Here, come and admire! A former officer of the Imperial Army, but now, as you see, a Bolshevik. He's got caught, and now he wants to tell us that he was with the Reds by accident, that he was mobilized. He lies as naively and absurdly as a high-school girl and thinks we're going to believe him. But he hasn't

got the courage to admit that he's been a traitor to his fatherland. . . . He's afraid, the scoundrel!"

Speaking with difficulty, the man said:

"I gather, Colonel, that you've got sufficient courage to insult a prisoner."

"I don't talk to scoundrels!"

"But I've got to speak!"

"Be careful! Don't force me to insult you in a more active fashion!"

"That is easy enough for you in your position, and, most important of all, you run no risk in doing so!"

Grigory, who had not said a word, sat down at the table and looked with a sympathetic smile at the prisoner. The man was white with indignation and answered back fearlessly. "He's made the colonel sit up!" Grigory thought with satisfaction, and felt a touch of malevolent joy as he looked at Andreyanov's fleshy, livid, nervously twitching cheeks.

Grigory had disliked his new chief of staff from the moment of their first meeting. Andreyanov was one of the class of officers who had not seen the front at all during the World War, but had prudently remained in the rear, pulling strings with influential official and family connections, and clinging with all his strength to a safe post. Even during the civil war he had been clever enough to get work in the rear, at Novocherkassk, and he was forced to go to the front only after Ataman Krasnov had been removed from power.

During the two nights Grigory and Andreyanov had been quartered together, Grigory had learned from the officer's own lips that he was very devout,

that he could not speak of divine worship without tears in his eyes, that he had the most exemplary wife imaginable, that her name was Sophia Alexandrovna and the deputy ataman von Grabbe himself had once unsuccessfully paid court to her. The colonel had added many fond details of the estate his dead father had possessed, of his own struggle to reach the rank of colonel, of the highly placed personages with whom he had hunted in 1916. He had also informed Grigory that he regarded whist as the finest of all games, cognac flavoured with cummin leaves as the most beneficial of all drinks, and service in the military commissariat as the most profitable of all appointments.

Colonel Andreyanov started at every close gunshot and would not ride a horse more than he could help, giving liver trouble as the reason. He showed continual anxiety to increase the number of the staff headquarters guard and could hardly conceal his dislike of the Cossacks, who, he said, had all been traitors in 1917. Since then he had hated all the "lower ranks" without discrimination. "Only the nobility can save Russia," he said, casually indicating that he also was of noble birth, and that the Andreyanov line was one of the oldest and most honourable in all the Don Province.

Certainly his chief weakness was garrulity—that elderly, uncontrollable, terrible garrulity which afflicts the declining years of a certain class of talkative and unintelligent people who all their lives have been in the habit of passing superficial and facile judgements on everything and anything.

Grigory had met many a man of this kidney and had always disliked them intensely. He tried to avoid Andreyanov as much as possible and succeeded quite well during the day. But as soon as they halted for the night, Andreyanov sought him out, hurriedly asked: "Shall we share quarters for the night?" and, without waiting for a reply: "You say, my friend, that the Cossacks can't be relied on in infantry attacks, but when I was an officer attached to His Excellency's— Hey, someone out there bring in my trunk and bedding." Grigory would lie down, close his eyes, and listen with clenched teeth. Then he would disrespectfully turn his back on the indefatigable talker, cover his head with his greatcoat, and think with dumb fury: "As soon as I get the order for my transfer, I'll hit him on the head with something heavy! Perhaps that'll rob him of speech for a week at any rate." "Are you asleep, squadron commander?" Andreyanov would ask. "Yes," Grigory would answer in a muffled voice. "Excuse me, but I haven't finished yet." And the story was continued. As Grigory dozed off he would think: "They've sent me this parrot on purpose. Fitshalaurov must have taken some step. Well, how can anyone serve with such a rotten apple?" And he would fall asleep with the colonel's penetrating tenor voice still pattering like a fine rain on an iron roof.

No wonder Grigory felt such malicious joy when he heard the captured Red commander ticking off the talkative chief of staff so neatly.

Andreyanov was silent for a whole minute, sitting with eyes half closed. The long lobes of his protruding ears went a brilliant crimson; his white, puffy

hand, with a massive gold ring on the index finger, trembled as it rested on the table.

"Listen, you mongrel," he said in a voice hoarse with agitation. "I didn't have you brought in front of me in order to indulge in repartee, don't forget that! Do you realize that, whatever happens, you can't get away with it?"

"I realize that perfectly."

"So much the better for you. In the last resort I don't care a damn whether you joined the Reds voluntarily or were mobilized. That doesn't matter; what does matter is that through a false conception of honour you are refusing to talk."

"Evidently you and I have a different conception of questions of honour. . . ."

"That's because you haven't any honour left, that's all!"

"Judging by the way you are treating me, I doubt whether you ever had any!"

"I take it you want to get to the end quickly!"

"Why should I try to drag it out? Don't try to frighten me; you can't do it!"

With trembling hands Andreyanov opened his cigarette-case, lit a cigarette, took a couple of hurried puffs, and turned again to the prisoner.

"So you refuse to answer the questions?"

"I've told you all about myself."

"Go to the devil! I'm not interested in your lousy personality. Kindly answer the following question: What reinforcements did you receive from the station of Sebyakovo?"

"I've told you I don't know."

"You do know!"

"Very good! If it pleases you, then I do know, but I shan't tell you!"

"I shall order you to be flogged with ramrods, and then you'll tell!"

"I doubt it!" The prisoner touched his moustache with his left hand and smiled confidently.

"Did the Kamyshinsky Regiment take part in this battle?"

"No."

"But your left flank was covered by cavalry: what regiment was it?"

"Give it a rest! I tell you once more that I shall not answer such questions."

"Take your choice: either you loosen your tongue this minute, you cur, or in ten minutes you'll be set against a wall! Well?"

In an unexpectedly high-pitched, youthful, ringing voice the prisoner answered:

"I've had enough of you, you old fool! You nitwit! If you'd fallen into my hands I wouldn't have cross-examined you like this. . . ."

Andreyanov turned pale and snatched at his pistol holster. Grigory unhurriedly rose and warningly raised his hand.

"Well, that's enough! You've had your chat, and that'll do. You're both quick-tempered, I see. . . . You haven't managed to reach an agreement, but it doesn't matter, and there's nothing more to talk about. He's quite right to refuse to betray his own men. By God, he's fine! I never expected him to stick it out like that."

"But allow me!" Andreyanov fumed, vainly trying to unbutton his holster.

"No, I won't allow you!" Grigory said cheerfully, going right up to the table and covering the prisoner with his body. "There's no point in killing a prisoner. Aren't you ashamed to go for a man in his position? Unarmed, a prisoner, not even left his clothes, and you're raising your hand—"

"Stand aside! That scoundrel's insulted me!" Andreyanov pushed Grigory away violently and pulled out his revolver.

The prisoner swiftly turned to face the window, shrugging his shoulders as though cold. Grigory watched the colonel with a smile as he gripped the rough revolver-butt in his palm, awkwardly flourished the weapon, then lowered the barrel and turned away.

"I don't want to soil my hands . . ." he said hoarsely, gaining his breath and licking his dry lips.

Making no attempt to restrain the laugh which gleamed from the white teeth under his moustache, Grigory said:

"You wouldn't have had to! If you look you'll see your gun's unloaded. When I got up this morning I picked it up from the table and had a look at it. There wasn't a single bullet in it, and it can't have been cleaned for a couple of months. You don't take very good care of your personal equipment."

Andreyanov lowered his eyes, spun the revolver drum with his fingers, and smiled.

"Damn it! But you're right. . . ."

Captain Sulin, who had been watching silently, a quizzical smile on his lips, rolled up the statement he

had been taking down, and said with a pleasant burr:

"I've told you more than once, Semyon Polikarpovich, that you treat your weapons disgustingly. Today's example is one more proof that I'm right."

Andreyanov knitted his brows and shouted:

"Hey, anyone there of the lower ranks? Here!"

Two orderlies and the commander of the guard came in from the front room.

"Take him away!" Andreyanov nodded at the prisoner.

The man turned and faced Grigory, silently bowed to him, and went towards the door. Grigory had the impression that his lips parted in a barely perceptible smile of gratitude under his fiery whiskers.

When the men's steps had died away, Andreyanov removed his spectacles with a weary gesture, carefully cleaned the lenses on a small piece of chamois leather, and said in a jaundiced tone:

"You defended that scum brilliantly, though that's a matter for your own conscience. But what do you mean by mentioning my pistol in his presence, putting me in an awkward position?"

"That's nothing very terrible," Grigory answered in a conciliatory tone.

"Maybe not, but all the same you shouldn't have done it. Though it's true I might have killed him. He's a loathsome type! I'd been struggling with him for half an hour before you arrived. It was terrible the way he lied and wriggled, giving obviously false information. And when I caught him at it, he flatly refused to speak at all. He said his officer's honour did not

allow him to betray military secrets to the enemy. The son of a bitch didn't think of his officer's honour when he hired himself out to the Bolsheviks.... I suggest that we have him and two others of the command quietly shot. So far as getting the information we want is concerned, they're hopeless in any case. They're inveterate and incorrigible scoundrels, and so there's no point in sparing them. What do you think?"

"How did you find out that he was the company commander?" Grigory asked, instead of answering the question.

"One of his own Red Army men betrayed him."

"I suggest that we have that man shot and spare the commanders." Grigory threw a challenging look at Andreyanov.

The colonel shrugged his shoulders and smiled as one smiles at a bad joke.

"No, but seriously, what do you think?"

"Why, exactly what I said."

"Excuse me, but on what grounds?"

"On what grounds? On the grounds of keeping discipline and order in the Russian Army. When we went to bed yesterday, you, Colonel, talked a lot of sense about the sort of order that's got to be introduced into the army when we've smashed the Bolsheviks, so we can purge the youth of the Red infection. I completely agreed with you, remember?" Grigory stroked his moustache, watching the changing expression on the colonel's face, and went on judiciously: "But now what are you suggesting? That way you'll corrupt the men of the army. The soldiers will think they can betray their officers! That's a fine thing to

teach them! But suppose we should happen to find ourselves in a similar situation, what then? Excuse me, but I don't agree with the idea."

"As you wish!" Andreyanov said coldly, staring closely at Grigory. He had heard that the insurgent commander had his own standard of morals and was a queer customer, but he had not expected anything like this from him. He only added: "We always have dealt with captured Red commanders like that, especially when they were former officers. Your idea is new to me. . . . And I don't quite understand your attitude in such a seemingly obvious matter."

"We killed them in battle if we had the chance, but we never shot prisoners without good reason," Grigory answered, turning livid.

"Good, then we'll send them to the rear," Andreyanov agreed. "Now here's another problem: some of the prisoners, mobilized peasants of Saratov Province, have expressed the desire to fight in our ranks. Our 3rd Infantry Regiment numbers less than three hundred bayonets. Do you think it possible, after a careful selection, to assign some of the volunteer prisoners to it? We have got definite instructions on the subject from the army staff."

"I'm not taking a single peasant into my command. Let the shortage be made up with Cossacks," Grigory flatly declared.

Andreyanov endeavoured to argue with him. "Listen, we won't quarrel," he said. "I understand your desire that the division should consist entirely of Cossacks, but necessity forces us not to turn up our noses even at prisoners. Even in the Volunteer Army certain

regiments have been brought up to strength with prisoners."

"They can do as they like, but I refuse to accept peasants. That's all," Grigory snapped.

A little later he went out to give instructions concerning the dispatch of the prisoners to the rear. Over dinner Andreyanov said in a tone of some agitation:

"It's clear we're not going to work well together. . . ."

"That's just what I was thinking," Grigory answered unconcernedly. Ignoring Sulin's smile, he fished a piece of boiled mutton out of his plate with his fingers and set to work to crunch the hard gristle with such a wolfish appetite that Sulin frowned as though in pain, and even closed his eyes for a second.

Two days later the pursuit of the retreating Red forces was taken over by General Salnikov's detachment, and Grigory was urgently summoned to the headquarters staff. After acquainting him with the order issued by the commander of the Don Army breaking up and re-allocating the insurgent forces, the chief of staff, a benign-looking elderly general, said without further preamble:

"During the partisan war against the Reds you commanded your division very successfully. But now we cannot entrust you with a regiment, far less a division. You've had no military education, and in the present conditions of a widely extended front and with contemporary methods of waging war you are not capable of commanding a large military unit. Do you agree?"

"Yes," Grigory answered. "I wanted to resign the command of the division anyway."

"It is very satisfactory that you don't overestimate your abilities. That quality is very rarely found in young officers these days. Well, then, by order of the commander of the front you are appointed commander of the Fourth Squadron of the 19th Regiment. The regiment is now on the march some fifteen versts from here, somewhere near the village of Vyaznikov. Report to the regiment today, or tomorrow at the latest. I think you have something you want to say?"

"I wanted to be assigned to the commissariat."

"That's impossible. You'll be needed at the front."

"In two wars I've been wounded and shell-shocked fourteen times."

"That is entirely without significance. You are young, you look fit, and you can still fight. As for your wounds, how many officers haven't got wounds to show? You can go. Good luck!"

Probably in order to forestall the dissatisfaction which was bound to arise among the upper Don Cossacks when the insurgent army as such was disbanded, immediately after the capture of Ust-Medveditskaya many rank-and-file Cossacks who had distinguished themselves in the rising were made non-commissioned officers, the sergeants were almost all raised to the rank of ensign while the officers who had taken part in the rising were also rewarded and raised in rank. Grigory was not overlooked. He was awarded a captaincy, and an army order mentioned his outstanding

services in the struggle against the Reds and expressed the gratitude of the command.

The disbandment of the insurgent regiments was carried through within a few days. The illiterate commanders of divisions and regiments were replaced by generals and colonels, experienced officers were appointed squadron commanders, the battery and staff commands were completely changed, while the rank-and-file Cossacks were allocated to the various Don regiments, which had been reduced far below their full complement during the battles on the Donets River.

Late in the afternoon Grigory assembled the Cossacks of his division, announced the disbandment of the insurgent army, and said in farewell:

"Don't bear any grudge against me, brother Cossacks! We've served together; necessity forced us to; but from today on we shall be nursing our sorrows separately. The main thing is to take good care of your heads and not to let the Reds make holes in them. Our heads may be stupid, but there's no point in stopping a bullet with them when there's no need. We shall yet need them to think with, to do some hard thinking about what to do next. . . ."

The Cossacks listened in dejected silence. When he had finished they all began to talk at once, in voices thick with agitation.

"So the old days are coming back again?"

"Where are we to go to now?"

"They're getting their own way with the people, the swine!"

"We don't want to be disbanded! What's this new system they're starting?"

"Well, boys, we've united to tread on our own necks!"

"The Excellencies are going to squeeze us again!"

"Look out now! They'll be straightening our joints for all they're worth...."

Grigory waited until there was silence, and said:

"It's no use your shouting yourselves hoarse. The easy times when we could discuss orders and oppose the commanders are past. Dismiss to your quarters and don't let your tongues wag so much or these days you'll find them getting you to field courts martial and the punishment companies."

The Cossacks came up to him in troop order, shook hands with him, and said:

"Good-bye, Panteleyevich! Don't think bad of us, either."

"It's not going to be easy for us to do our service under strangers."

"You shouldn't have let us go. You shouldn't have agreed to resign command of the division."

"We shall miss you, Melekhov. The new commanders may be more educated than you, but that won't make it any the lighter for us. It'll be heavier, that's the trouble."

But one Cossack, the squadron jester and wag, remarked:

"Don't you believe 'em, Grigory Panteleyevich! Whether you serve with your own folk or under strangers it's all the same if your conscience doesn't agree with it."

That night Grigory sat drinking home-made vodka with Yermakov and the other Cossacks, and next morning he rode off with Prokhor Zykov to overtake the 19th Regiment.

Before he had had time to take over the squadron and to get properly acquainted with his men he was summoned to the regimental commander. It was early morning. Grigory was held up over inspecting the horses and reported half an hour later. He expected the strict regimental commander, a martinet to his officers, to pull him up. But the commander gave him a friendly welcome, asked: "Well, what do you think of your squadron? A fine lot, eh?" and, not waiting for an answer, staring past Grigory, went on:

"Well, my friend, I've got to communicate some very mournful news to you. . . . You've had a great misfortune at home. A telegram arrived last night from Vyeshenskaya. I'm granting you a month's leave to arrange your family affairs. You can go at once."

"Give me the telegram," Grigory muttered, turning pale.

He took the folded sheet of paper, opened it, read it, and crushed it in his hand, which had suddenly become damp with sweat. With a little effort he regained his self-control, and he hardly stammered as he said:

"Well, I didn't expect that. I'd better go. Good-bye."

"Don't forget to take your pass."

"Of course. Thanks, I shan't forget."

He strode into the porch, walking confidently and firmly, holding his sword steady as usual. But as he began to descend from the veranda he suddenly

ceased to note the sound of his own steps, and felt as though a sharp pain had struck like a bayonet into his heart.

On the bottom step he stumbled. With his left hand he clutched at the rickety balustrade, while with his right he swiftly unbuttoned the collar of his tunic. For a minute he stood breathing deep and fast, but in that minute he seemed to grow drunk with his suffering, and when he tore his hand away from the balustrade and went to the wicket-gate, where his horse was tethered, he walked heavily, swaying as he went.

XVI

For several days after her talk with Darya, Natalya suffered as one does in sleep, when oppressed by a bad dream and unable to awake. She sought a plausible excuse for visiting Prokhor Zykov's wife and trying to find out from her how Grigory had lived at Vyeshenskaya during the retreat and whether he had seen Aksinya there or not. She wanted to be convinced of her husband's misdoings, for she both believed and disbelieved Darya's story.

It was late in the evening when she made her way to the Zykovs' yard, unconcernedly waving a small twig in her hand. Her work finished for the day, Prokhor's wife was sitting by the gate.

"Hullo, soldier's wife!" Natalya called. "Have you seen our calf?"

"Glory be, my dear! No, I haven't seen it."

"He's such a wanderer, curse him! He won't stay at home at all! I can't think where to look for him."

"Stop and have a rest; he'll turn up. Would you like some sunflower seeds?"

Natalya went and sat down beside her. They fell into women's artless talk.

"Any news of your soldier?" Natalya inquired.

"Not a word. Seems to have vanished into thin air, the Antichrist! Has yours sent any news?"

"No. Grisha promised to write, but so far he hasn't sent one letter. They say our troops have got beyond Ust-Medveditskaya, but I haven't heard anything else." Natalya shifted the conversation to talk of the recent retreat across the Don and cautiously began to ask how the soldiers had lived in Vyeshenskaya and whether any of the village people had been there. Prokhor's crafty wife guessed what Natalya had come to see her about, and her answers were restrained and curt.

Her husband had told her all about Grigory, but although her tongue was itching to wag, she was afraid to say anything, remembering Prokhor's admonition: "You mark my words: if you say a word of what I've told you I'll put your head down on the chopping-block, pull your tongue out a yard, and chop it off. If any rumour of this reaches Grigory he'll kill me without thinking twice about it. I may be fed up with you, but I'm not fed up with life yet, understand? So keep your mouth shut..."

"Your Prokhor didn't happen to see Aksinya Astakhova in Vyeshenskaya?" Natalya asked outright, losing all patience.

"Why should he have seen her? Do you think he had time for that there? God's truth, I know nothing,

Mironovna, and you mustn't even ask me about it. You can't get any sense out of my white-headed devil. All he can say is do this, do that."

When Natalya left her she was even more vexed and agitated. But she could remain no longer in ignorance, and she was driven on to go and see Aksinya herself.

Living next door to one another, they had met frequently of recent years. On such occasions they would silently bow or sometimes pass a few remarks. The days when they had refused to greet each other and had exchanged hateful glances were gone; their mutual hostility had lost its original asperity, and when she went to see Aksinya, Natalya hoped she would not drive her away and would want to talk about Grigory. She was not mistaken in her expectations.

Making no attempt to hide her astonishment, Aksinya invited Natalya into the best room, pulled the curtains, lit the lamp, and asked:

"What good news has brought you here?"

"I have no cause to come with good news to you...."

"Tell me the bad news then. Has anything happened to Grigory Panteleyevich?"

There was such deep, unconcealed anxiety in Aksinya's question that Natalya realized all. In one phrase Aksinya had revealed all herself, all she lived for and all her fears. After that there was really no need to ask about her relations with Grigory. Yet Natalya did not go, and after a momentary hesitation she said: "No, my husband's alive and well; don't be alarmed!"

"I'm not alarmed; why should you think so? It's for you to worry about his health; I've troubles enough of my own." Aksinya spoke easily, but, feeling the blood rushing to her face, she swiftly went to the table. Standing with her back to her visitor, she spent a long time adjusting the lamp wick, although it was already burning quite well.

"Is there any news of your Stepan?"

"He sent me his greetings recently."

"Is he well?"

"It seems so." Aksinya shrugged her shoulders.

Again she could not be false to herself or dissemble her feelings; her unconcern for the fate of her husband was so obvious that Natalya involuntarily smiled.

"I can see you don't worry very much about him. . . . But that's your business. This is what I've come for: there's talk going round the village that Grigory's making up to you again, and that you see him when he comes home. Is it true?"

"You've come to the right person to ask!" Aksinya said in a jeering tone. "Suppose I ask you whether it's true?"

"Are you afraid to tell the truth?"

"No, I'm not."

"Then tell me, so that I know and don't go on tormenting myself. Why should I get upset over nothing?"

Aksinya's dark brows twitched as she narrowed her eyes.

"In any case you won't get any pity from me," she said sharply. "It's like this between you and me:

when I'm miserable, you're glad; and when you're miserable, I'm glad.... For we share the same man, don't we? Well, I'll tell you the truth, so that you may know in good time. It's all true, they're not talking nonsense. I've won Grigory again, and this time I shall do my best not to let him slip out of my hands. And now what are you going to do? Smash the windows of my house, or stab me with a knife?"

Natalya tied the flexible switch in her hand into a knot, threw it towards the stove, and answered with an unnatural firmness:

"I shall do no wrong to you now. I shall wait until Grigory comes back and have a talk with him. And then we shall see what I'm going to do about the pair of you. I've got two children, and I shall know how to stand up for them and for myself, too!"

Aksinya smiled and answered:

"So for the present I can live without fear of anything?"

Not noticing the sneer, Natalya went up to Aksinya and touched her by the sleeve.

"Aksinya, all my life you've stood in my way, but now I shall not plead as I did once before, you remember? Then I was younger, stupider; I thought: 'I'll plead with her and she'll have pity, she'll soften her heart and give Grigory up.' I shan't this time. One thing I know: you don't love him, you only hanker after him out of habit. Did you ever love him like I do? It doesn't look like it. You played about with Listnitsky, and who haven't you played about

with, you flirt? When a woman loves a man she doesn't do that."

Aksinya turned pale; pushing Natalya away, she rose from the chest.

"He never reproached me with that. But you do! And what business is it of yours? All right! I'm bad and you're good. What of it?"

"That's all. Don't be angry. I'm going now. Thank you for telling me the truth."

"Don't bother to thank me; you'd have found out without my help. Wait a bit; I'll come out with you and close the shutters."

In the porch Aksinya halted and said:

"I'm glad we part in peace, without a fight. But I tell you, dear neighbour, that so far as the future is concerned, it's going to be like this. If you've got the strength, take him; but if you haven't, don't be offended. I shan't willingly give him up any more than you will. I'm not so young now, and though you called me a flirt, I'm not your Darya. In all my life I have never played about where such things are concerned. You've got children, but to me he's—" Aksinya's voice quivered, and went huskier and deeper. "He's all I care for in the whole world. He's my first and my last. But let's not talk about him any more. If he comes through alive, if the Queen of Heaven saves him from death and he comes back, then he'll choose for himself. . . ."

That night Natalya could not sleep. Next morning she went with Ilyinichna to weed the melons. She found things easier to bear when she was working. Her mind was not so occupied with the one thought

as she steadily brought the hoe down on the clods of sandy, sun-dried, crumbling clay. Occasionally she straightened her back to rest, to wipe the sweat from her face and to take a drink.

White clouds, tousled and torn by the wind, were floating and melting across the blue sky. The sun's rays beat down on the scorching earth. Rain was approaching from the east. Without raising her head Natalya could feel when a floating cloud covered the sun. She felt a momentary coolness on her back; a grey shadow hurried over the brown, hot earth, over the tangle of water-melon tendrils. It covered the melons scattered over the slope, the grasses limp and flattened with heat, the bushes of hawthorn and bramble with their dismal-looking foliage sprinkled with bird-droppings. The yearning cry of the quails grew louder, the pleasant song of the skylarks came more distinctly to the ear, and even the wind stirring the warm grasses seemed less sultry. But then the sun would pierce the dazzling white edge of the cloud as it floated westward and, freeing itself from its net, once more throw slanting, sparkling golden torrents of light down to the earth. Somewhere a long way off, on the azure spurs of the Don-side hills, the blotchy shadow of the retreating cloud was still groping over the earth. But in the melon-patches the amber-yellow noontide reigned once more, the fluid haze quivered and danced on the horizon, and the earth and the grasses it fed smelled still more pungently.

At noon Natalya went to a spring in the cliff and brought back a pitcher of icy water. She and Ilyichna drank their fill, washed their hands, and sat

down in the sun to eat their dinner. Ilyinichna spread out a kerchief and neatly cut up bread on it. She took spoons and a cup out of the bag and drew a narrow-necked ewer of sour milk from under her jacket, where she had hidden it away from the sun.

Natalya ate poorly, and her mother-in-law asked:

"I've noticed for some time that you've changed somehow. . . . Has anything gone wrong between you and Grisha?"

Natalya's weathered lips quivered miserably. "He's going with Aksinya again, Mother."

"What—how do you know?"

"I went to see her yesterday."

"And did she admit it, the hussy?"

"Yes."

Ilyinichna was silent, thinking. Her lined face set sternly, the corners of her lips drew down grimly.

"Maybe she's only bragging, curse her."

"No, Mother, it's true. Why should she. . . ?"

"You haven't kept your eye on him. . . ." the old woman said tentatively. "You can't take your eyes off that sort of husband."

"But how can anyone keep her eyes on him? I relied on his conscience. . . . Had I got to tie him to my apron strings?" Natalya smiled bitterly, and added almost inaudibly: "He's not Mishatka, to be kept in order like a child. He's gone grey quite a lot, but he doesn't forget the past. . . ."

Ilyinichna washed and wiped the spoons, rinsed out the cup, collected the utensils in the bag, and only then asked:

"Is that all the trouble?"

"You are strange, Mother! That one trouble's enough to make life miserable."

"And what are you thinking of doing?"

"What is there I can do? I'll take the children and go to my own people. I shan't live with him any longer. Let him take her into his home and live with her.... I've been tortured enough already."

"I thought like that, too, when I was young," Ilyinichna said with a sigh. "My man was a dog, too, there's no gainsaying it. I couldn't tell you all I suffered through him. Only it isn't easy to leave your own husband; and besides, what's the use of it? You think it out a bit more and you'll see that for yourself. And how can you take the children away from their father? No, you're talking nonsense. You're not even to think of it; I shan't allow it!"

"Well, Mother, I shan't live with him, so don't waste your breath."

"What do you mean by 'don't waste your breath'?" Ilyinichna took offence at the remark. "Aren't you my daughter then? Am I sorry for the accursed pair of you or not? And you can say such things to me, to your mother, to an old woman? I've told you to put it right out of your head, and that's enough! Pah! 'I'll leave home,' she says. But where will you go? Who of your own people wants you? You've got no father, your house is burned down, your own mother is glad to Christ to live in someone else's house. And yet you're going off to her and want to drag my grandchildren with you? No, my dear, that won't do! We'll see what to do with Grisha when he comes back; but now you're not even to talk to me about it. I won't

have it, and I don't want to hear another word about it!"

All the pain that had been accumulating for so long in Natalya's heart suddenly broke out in a convulsive fit of sobbing. With a groan she tore the kerchief from her head, fell face downward on the dry, ungracious earth, and, pressing her breast to the ground, sobbed on and on without tears.

Ilyinichna—wise and brave old woman that she was—did not even stir from where she was sitting. After a while she carefully wrapped the ewer with the rest of the milk in it in her jacket, laid it aside in a cool spot, then poured water into the cup and sat down beside Natalya. She knew that words were of no help in such sorrow; she knew, too, that tears were better than dry eyes and firmly pressed lips. She let Natalya weep till she could weep no more, then laid her work-worn hand on her daughter-in-law's head. Stroking the black, lustrous hair, she said sternly:

"Well, that's enough! Don't use up all your tears, leave some for another time. Here, take a drink of water."

Natalya quietened down. Her shoulders still heaved occasionally and a fine trembling possessed her body. Unexpectedly she jumped up, pushed Ilyinichna aside, and, turning her face eastward, putting her tear-stained palms together in prayer, hurriedly, sobbingly screamed:

"Lord! He's tortured my soul to death! I haven't the strength to go on living like this. Lord, punish him, curse him! Strike him dead! May he live no longer, torture me no longer!"

A black, rolling cloud crawled onward from the east. Thunder rumbled hollowly. Piercing the precipitous cloudy masses, a burning white flash of lightning writhed and slipped over the sky. The wind bent the murmuring grass westward, sent a pungent dust flying up from the track, bowed the sunflower caps with their burden of seeds almost to the ground. It tore at Natalya's dishevelled hair, dried her wet face, and wound the edge of her grey workaday skirt around her legs.

Ilyinichna stood for several seconds staring at her daughter-in-law in superstitious horror. Against the background of the black thundercloud which had climbed to the zenith Natalya seemed a strange and terrible creature.

The rain came upon them impetuously. The calm before the thunder-storm lasted only a moment. Dropping obliquely, a sparrow-hawk began to cry anxiously, a suslik whistled close to its burrow, the violent wind threw a fine sandy dust into Ilyinichna's face and went howling over the steppe. The old woman struggled to her feet. Her face was deathly pale as, through the roar of the approaching storm, she shouted:

"What are you saying? God help you! Whose death are you calling for?"

"Lord, punish him! Punish him, Lord!" Natalya screamed, fixing her frenzied eyes on the majestically and wildly gathering clouds, piled into masses by the wind, lit up by blinding flashes of lightning.

The thunder broke with a dry crash over the steppe. Beside herself with fear, Ilyinichna made the sign of the cross, went with uncertain steps to Natalya, and seized her shoulder.

"Go down on your knees! Do you hear, Natalya?"

Natalya looked at her mother-in-law with unseeing eyes and helplessly sank to her knees.

"Ask God for His forgiveness!" Ilyinichna ordered sternly. "Ask Him not to accept your prayer. Whose death are you asking for? The father of your own children? Oh, it's a mortal sin.... Cross yourself! Bow down to the earth! Say: 'Lord, forgive me my wickedness, sinful that I am.'"

Natalya crossed herself, whispered something with white lips, and, clenching her teeth, rolled awkwardly on her side.

Washed by the downpour, the steppe turned wonderfully green. A brilliant arching rainbow was flung from the distant pond right to the Don. In the west the thunder was still rumbling hollowly. Muddy hill water was pouring and gurgling along the runnels. Foaming rills streamed down to the Don over the slope, over the melon plots, carrying with them leaves torn away by the rain, grass washed by its roots out of the soil, broken ears of rye. A rich, sandy silt crawled over the melon plots, piling against the melon and water-melon tendrils. Along the summer tracks flowed the rejoicing water, washing out deep ruts. A stack of hay, set on fire by lightning, was burning out on a spur of a distant ravine. And the lilac column of smoke rose high, almost touching the crest of the rainbow arching over the horizon.

Setting their bare feet cautiously on the dirty, slippery road and lifting their skirts high, Ilyinichna and

Natalya made their way down to the village. As they went, Ilyinichna said:

"You're terribly touchy, you youngsters, God's truth! The least thing and you go into a frenzy. If you'd lived as I had to live when I was young, then what would you have done? All his life Grisha hasn't raised a finger against you, and still you're not satisfied, but you must go and carry on like that. You want to throw him over, and you go off into a fit, and I don't know what you didn't do. You even brought God into your dirty business. . . . Well, tell me, you poor thing, is that good? But when I was young my game-legged idol used to thrash me almost to death, and that all for nothing, all over nothing. I hadn't done the least thing to deserve it. He himself behaved abominably, but he worked his temper off on me. He used to come home at dawn, and I would scream and cry and fling reproaches at him, and he would give his fist its sweet will. . . . For a month I'd go about as blue as iron all over, and yet I lived through it and brought up the children, and not once did I try to clear out. I'm not going to praise Grisha, but you can at least live with a man like that. If it hadn't been for that snake he'd have made as good a husband as you could wish for. She's bewitched him, to be sure."

Natalya walked along for some time silently turning over something in her mind, then said: "I don't want to talk about it any more, Mother. When Grigory comes back, then we'll see what I'm to do. Maybe I'll clear out of my own choice, or maybe he'll turn me out. But for the present I shan't leave your house to go anywhere else."

"Now, you should have said that long ago!" Ilyinichna rejoiced. "God grant everything will work out for the best. He wouldn't turn you out for anything, and you're not to think of it! He loves both you and the children so much, do you think he'd ever hear of it? Never! He won't forsake you for Aksinya; he can't do that! And there are quarrels even in the best of families! So long as he comes back alive...."

"I don't want him to die. I said that in my temper. Don't throw that up in my face.... I can't turn him out of my heart, but all the same, life is hard enough."

"My dear, my own one! Do you think I don't know? Only you never ought to do anything in a rush. You're right, let's drop all the talk about it. And for the Lord's sake don't say anything to the old man about it. It's nothing to do with him."

"There's one thing I must tell you.... It isn't clear at the moment whether I'll be living with Grigory or not. But I don't want to have any more children by him. Even with the two I've got it's not certain where I may have to go.... But I'm already carrying another, Mother...."

"Since when?"

"I'm in my third month."

"But how can you get away from that? You've got to bear the child whether you want to or not."

"I won't!" Natalya said resolutely. "I'm going this very day to see old Kapitonovna. She'll rid me of it.... She's done it for other women."

"What, you'll kill the seed? And you can talk like that, you shameless hussy?" The indignant Ilyinichna halted in the middle of the road and clapped her

hands. She was about to say something more, but behind them there was a rattle of wheels, the sucking noise of horse-hoofs in the mud, and someone's shout to his horse.

Ilyinichna and Natalya stepped off the road, letting their tucked-up skirts down as they went. Old Beskhlebov was driving back from the fields, and as he drew level with them he reined in his spirited little mare.

"Climb in, women, and I'll take you home; you don't want to knead the mud for nothing."

"Thank you, Agevich; we're tired out with slipping about," Ilyinichna said contentedly; she was the first to seat herself in the capacious wagon.

After dinner Ilyinichna wanted to have a talk with Natalya, to explain to her that there was no reason why she should free herself of her pregnancy. As she washed up the dishes she thought over the arguments which seemed to her to carry the most conviction, and even considered telling Pantelei of Natalya's decision and calling in his aid to dissuade their grief-crazed daughter-in-law from her unwise step. But while she was dealing with domestic matters Natalya quietly got herself ready and left the house.

"Where's Natalya?" Ilyinichna asked Dunya a little later.

"She made up a bundle and went out."

"Where to? What did she say? What sort of bundle?"

"Why, how should I know, Mother? She put a clean skirt and something else into a kerchief and went out without saying a word."

"Unhappy child!" To Dunya's amazement, Ilyinichna helplessly burst into tears and sat down on the bench.

"What's the matter, Mother? God help you, what are you crying for?"

"Mind your own business, you pest! It's nothing to do with you! But what did she say? And why didn't you tell me when she was getting ready?"

In a vexed tone Dunya answered:

"Oh, you're terrible! Why, how was I to know I'd got to tell you? She hasn't gone for good, has she? She must have gone off to see her mother, and what you're crying for I haven't the least idea."

Ilyinichna waited with the greatest anxiety for Natalya's return. Fearing her husband's reproaches and censure, she decided to say nothing to him about it.

At sunset the herd returned from the steppe. The short summer twilight descended. Lights glowed here and there in the village, but Natalya was still missing. The Melekhov family sat down to supper. Pale with agitation, Ilyinichna served up the home-made noodles with onion fried in vegetable oil. The old man picked up his spoon, gathered crumbs of stale bread in it, poured them into his bearded mouth, and, abstractedly looking around at the others seated at the table, asked:

"Where's Natalya? Why don't you call her to the table?"

"She's out," Ilyinichna replied in a low tone.

"Out where?"

"She must have gone to see her mother and decided to stay."

"She's staying a long time. She's old enough to know better . . ." Pantelei muttered discontentedly.

As always, he ate diligently, zealously; occasionally he laid his spoon down bottom upward on the table, took a sidelong, approving glance at Mishatka, who was sitting beside him, and said roughly: "Turn round a bit, my boy; let me wipe your lips. Your mother's a wanderer, and there's no one to look after you. . . ." He wiped his grandson's tender, rosy little lips with his large, black, horny palm.

They ate their meal in silence and rose from the table. Pantelei gave the order:

"Put out the light. We haven't got much oil, and there's no point in wasting it."

"Shall I bolt the door?" Ilyinichna asked.

"Yes."

"But how about Natalya?"

"If she turns up, she'll knock. Maybe she'll go roaming till morning. A fine way of carrying on! You'd better let her have more of her own way, you old hag! Taking it into her head to go visiting at night. . . . I'll tell her so in the morning. She's following Darya's lead. . . ."

Ilyinichna lay down without undressing. For half an hour she lay sighing and turning over quietly. She was about to get up and go to see Kapitonovna when she heard uncertain, shuffling steps under the window. She jumped up with an agility not common in one of her years, hurriedly ran out into the passage, and opened the door.

Natalya, as pale as death, clutching at the hand-rail, slowly came up the steps. The full moon bril-

liantly lit up her sunken face, her hollow eyes, her painfully knitted brows. As she walked she trembled like a stricken animal, and wherever she set her feet she left a dark blood-stain.

Ilyinichna silently put her arms around her and led her into the porch. Natalya leaned her back against the door and hoarsely whispered:

"Is everybody asleep? Mother, wipe up the blood behind me. . . . Look, I've left traces. . . ."

"What have you done to yourself?" Ilyinichna whispered, choking back her sobs.

Natalya tried to smile, but a miserable grimace distorted her face.

"Don't start crying, Mother, or you'll wake the others up. . . . Well, I've rid myself. . . . Now I've got a quiet heart. . . . Only there's a lot of blood. It's pouring out of me as if I'd been cut open. . . . Give me your hand, Mother. My head's swimming."

Ilyinichna bolted the door; then, as though she were in a strange house, she groped a long time with a trembling hand and could not find the handle to the inner door in the darkness. Walking on tiptoe, she led Natalya into the large best room. She woke up Dunya and sent her out, called Darya, and lit the lamp.

The door leading to the kitchen was open, and through it came Pantelei's loud measured snoring. Little Polyushka was sweetly smacking her lips and muttering something in her sleep. Deep is a child's untroubled, restful sleep!

While Ilyinichna was puffing up the pillow and getting the bed ready, Natalya sat down on a bench

and weakly laid her head on the edge of the table. Dunya wanted to come into the room, but Ilyinichna harshly told her:

"Go away, you shameless hussy, and don't show yourself here! It's nothing for you to poke your nose into!"

Scowling, Darya took a wet rag and went into the porch. Natalya painfully raised her head and said:

"Take the clean bedding off the bed.... Spread a piece of sacking for me.... I'm sure to soil it...."

"Hold your tongue!" Ilyinichna ordered. "Undress and lie down! Do you feel bad? Shall I bring you some water?"

"I'm feeling terribly weak.... Bring me a clean shift and water...."

With an effort Natalya rose and went with uncertain steps to the bed. Only then did Ilyinichna notice that her skirt was soaked with blood and hanging heavily around her, clinging to her legs. She stared with horror as Natalya bent down and wrung out the edge of the skirt as though she had been out in the rain, then began to undress.

"But you're bleeding to death!" Ilyinichna sobbed out.

Natalya undressed and closed her eyes, breathing spasmodically and quickly. The old woman took one glance at her; then, with a resolute air, marched into the kitchen. After a struggle she managed to arouse Pantelei and said:

"Natalya's ill.... She's very bad, she may be dying.... Harness up the horse at once and drive to Vyeshenskaya for the doctor."

"A devilish fine thing! What's happened to her? What's she ill with? She'd do better not to go roving at night. . . ."

The old woman briefly explained what had happened. Pantelei jumped out of bed in a frenzy and, buttoning up his trousers as he went, strode towards the best room.

"Ah, you filthy hussy! Ah, you daughter of a bitch! What have you been up to, eh? Necessity forced her to it! Well, I'll teach her. . . ."

"Are you mad, damn you? Where are you going? Don't go in there, she doesn't want you. . . . You'll wake the children up. Go out to the yard and harness the horse quickly!" Ilyinichna tried to stop the old man. But, paying no attention to her, he went to the door of the best room and kicked it open.

"You've done a fine thing, you daughter of the devil!" he roared, halting on the threshold.

"You mustn't! Father, don't come in, for Christ's sake don't come in!" Natalya screamed piercingly. She had taken off her shift, and she pressed it to her breast.

Swearing violently, Pantelei looked for his coat and cap, then the harness. He was so long over it that Dunya could not control herself. She burst into the kitchen and fell on her father, while the tears started to her eyes:

"Drive off at once! What are you rummaging about like a beetle in dung for? Natalya's dying, and he takes a whole hour to get ready! And he calls himself a father! If you don't want to go, why don't you say

so? I'll harness up the horse myself and drive to Vyeshenskaya!"

"You're daft! What are you flying off about? Who's going to take orders from you, you sticky scab? Here's another of them shouting at her father, the slut!" Pantelei wrapped his coat round him defiantly and, muttering curses under his breath, went out into the yard.

After his departure everybody in the house felt less constrained. Darya washed the floor, ruthlessly shifting chairs and benches. Ilyinichna allowed Dunya into the best room, and the girl sat at Natalya's head, smoothing the pillow, giving her water. Ilyinichna occasionally stole in to the children sleeping in the side room; then, returning to the best room, she gazed at Natalya, resting her cheek on her palm, shaking her head bitterly.

Natalya lay silent; her head with its tangled skeins of dank, sweat-soaked hair rolled about the pillow. Every half-hour Ilyinichna gently lifted her, drew away the saturated bedding, and spread clean linen.

With every hour Natalya grew weaker. Some time after midnight she opened her eyes and asked:

"Will it begin to get light soon?"

"No sign as yet," the old woman soothed her, thinking to herself: "That means she isn't going to come through. She's afraid of going without seeing the children...."

As though to confirm her guess, Natalya quietly said: "Mother, wake up Mishatka and Polyushka...."

"What for, my dear? What do you want to disturb them in the middle of the night for? They'll be terri-

fied if they see you, and they'll start crying. . . . Why wake them up?"

"I'd like to see them. . . . I'm feeling bad."

"God have mercy. . . . What are you saying? In a minute Father will be bringing the doctor, and he'll help you. You ought to try to get some sleep, my dear, don't you think?"

"What sleep can I get?" Natalya answered with a hint of annoyance in her tone. After that she said no more for some time, and her breathing grew more regular.

Ilyinichna quietly stole out on to the steps and gave way to her tears. She returned with a red and swollen face to the room when the dawn was beginning to show a faint glimmer in the east. As the door creaked, Natalya opened her eyes and asked again:

"Will it be getting light soon?"

"It's dawning now."

"Cover my feet with a sheepskin."

Dunya threw a sheepskin over her feet and tucked in the warm blanket at the sides. Natalya thanked her with a look, then called Ilyinichna closer and said:

"Sit down by me, Mother, and you, Dunya and Darya, go out for a while. I want to talk to Mother alone. . . . Have they gone?" she asked, without opening her eyes.

"Yes."

"Father hasn't come back yet?"

"He'll be back soon. Are you feeling worse, then?"

"No; it doesn't matter. . . . This is what I wanted to say. Mother, I'm going to die soon. I can feel it in my heart. I've lost so much blood, it's terrible!

Tell Darya when she lights the stove to put on plenty of water.... You wash me yourselves; I don't want strange...."

"Natalya! Cross yourself, darling! What are you talking about death for? God is merciful; you'll get better."

With a feeble gesture Natalya asked her mother-in-law to be silent and said:

"Don't interrupt me. It's hard enough for me to talk as it is, and I want to say—My head's swimming again. Have I told you about the water? But I must be strong.... Kapitonovna did it quite early, as soon as I got there after dinner.... She was terrified at what happened, poor woman. I lost a terrible lot of blood.... If only I can live till morning.... Put on a lot of water. I want to be clean when I die.... Mother, dress me in my green skirt, the one with the embroidery around the edges. Grisha liked me in that one.... And my poplin jacket—it's in the chest at the top, in the right-hand corner, just under a shawl.... And when I die, you can send the children to my people.... You might send for Mother; let her come at once.... I must say good-bye to her. Get the sheet from under me. It's all wet...."

Raising Natalya with one arm under her back, Ilyichna drew away the sheet and somehow managed to tuck another under her. With an effort Natalya whispered:

"Turn me over—on my side." And she lost consciousness.

The dove-grey dawn peered in at the window. Dunya washed a bucket and went out into the yard to

milk the cows. Ilyinichna threw the window wide open and the best room, heavy with the scent of fresh blood and the smell of burned paraffin, was freshened with the sharp, invigorating chill of the summer morning. The wind swept the tear-drops of dew off the cherry leaves lying on the outside window-ledge; the early voices of birds, the lowing of cows, and the occasional heavy cracking of the cowherd's whip came through the window.

Natalya opened her eyes, licked her dry, bloodless, yellow lips with the tip of her tongue, and asked for a drink. She no longer asked after the children or her mother. Everything was slipping away from her, and slipping away for ever.

Ilyinichna closed the window and went across to the bed. How terribly Natalya had changed during this one night! The previous day she had been like a young apple-tree in blossom—beautiful, healthy, strong; but now her cheeks were whiter than chalk from the Don-side hills, her nose was peaked, her lips had lost their recent brilliant freshness, had grown thinner, and seemed to be shrinking back from her parted teeth. Only her eyes retained their former glitter, but their expression had changed. They had a new, strange, alarming look as from time to time, submitting to some inexplicable necessity, she raised her bluish lids and peered around the room, then rested her glance on Ilyinichna for a second.

Pantelei returned at sunrise. The heavy-eyed doctor, weary with sleepless nights and endless bother with typhus and wounded cases, stretched himself and climbed out of the tarantass, took a bundle from the

seat, and went into the house. On the steps he removed his canvas rain-coat, and leaning over the hand-rail, spent a long time washing his hairy hands, looking up under his eyebrows at Dunya as she poured water from a jug into his palms, and even winking at her. Then he went into the best room and spent a good ten minutes with Natalya, first sending out everybody else.

Pantelei and Ilyinichna sat down in the kitchen.

"Well, how is she?" the old man asked in a whisper as soon as they left the best room.

"Bad. . . ."

"Did she do it of her own will?"

"It was her own idea," Ilyinichna evaded the question.

"Hot water, quick!" the doctor ordered, thrusting his tousled head round the door.

While the water was being heated he came into the kitchen. At the old man's mute question he waved his hand hopelessly:

"She'll be gone by dinner-time. She's lost a terrible quantity of blood. There's nothing to be done! Have you sent word to Grigory Panteleyevich?"

Without answering, Pantelei hurriedly limped out into the porch. Darya saw the old man go under the eaves of the shed to the mowing machine, lean his head against a pile of old dung-fuel bricks, and weep aloud.

The doctor remained another half-hour and sat a little while on the steps, dozing under the rays of the rising sun. When the samovar began to boil he went back into the best room, gave Natalya a camphor

injection, then came out and asked for some milk. Stifling a yawn, he drank two glasses of milk and said:

"Take me back at once. I've got sick and wounded waiting at Vyeshenskaya, and there's nothing I can do here. It's quite hopeless. I'd do anything I could for Grigory Panteleyevich, but I tell you frankly I can do nothing. There's little enough we can do at the best of times: we can only heal the sick; we haven't yet learned how to resurrect the dead. And your little woman has been so badly cut about that she's got nothing left to live with.... The womb's torn terribly, there's nothing of it left. I expect the old woman used an iron hook. It's our ignorance; you can't ever get away from it!"

Pantelei threw hay into the tarantass and told Darya:

"You drive him back. Don't forget to water the mare when you drop down to the Don."

He was about to offer the doctor money, but the man flatly refused it.

"You ought to be ashamed even to speak of it, Pantelei Prokofyevich! My own people, and you're offering me money! No, don't come near me with it. How can you repay me? You needn't ask. If I could put your daughter-in-law on her feet it would be a different matter."

About six o'clock in the morning Natalya felt considerably better. She asked for a wash, combed her hair before a mirror which Dunya held for her, and, looking around at her dear ones, her eyes glittering, she forced a smile.

"Well, now I'm on the mend! But I was really frightened! I thought I was done for. . . . But why are the children sleeping so late? Dunya, go and see if they're awake yet."

Her mother, Lukinichna, arrived with her younger sister, Agrippina. The old woman burst into tears when she saw her daughter, but Natalya said again and again in an agitated tone: "What are you crying for, Mother? I'm not so bad now . . . you haven't come to bury me, have you? Oh, do tell me, what are you crying for?"

Agrippina gave her mother a nudge and, guessing the reason, Lukinichna swiftly wiped her eyes and said in a soothing tone: "Why, what are you thinking, child? I was crying just because I've such a stupid head. My heart ached as I looked at you. You've changed so much. . . ."

A faint flush glowed in Natalya's cheeks when she heard Mishatka's voice and Polyushka's laugh.

"Bring them in here! Call them quick!" she asked. "They can dress after."

Polyushka came in first and halted at the door, rubbing her sleepy eyes with her little fist.

"Your mummy's fallen ill," Natalya said with a smile. "Come over to me, my treasure!"

Polyushka looked in surprise at the grown-ups sitting gravely on the benches and, going over to her mother, said in a vexed tone: "Why didn't you wake me up? And what have they all come for?"

"They've come to see me. . . . But why should I have woken you up?"

"I'd have brought you some water and sat with you. . . ."

"Well, go and wash, comb your hair and say your prayers, and then you can come and sit with me. . . ."

"But will you be getting up for breakfast?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"Well, then I'll bring your breakfast in here. Would you like that, Mummy?"

"She's the very image of her father; only her heart's not like his, hers is softer . . ." Natalya said with a feeble smile, letting her head fall back and pulling the blanket around her legs as though she were cold.

An hour later she took a turn for the worse. She beckoned the children to her, embraced them, made the sign of the cross over them, kissed them, and asked her mother to take them to her. Lukinichna entrusted the children to Agrippina and remained with her daughter.

Natalya closed her eyes and said, as though delirious:

"So I shan't see him after all. . . ." Then, as though she had remembered something, she sharply raised herself on the bed and asked: "Bring Mishatka back."

The tear-stained Agrippina pushed the boy into the room and remained, quietly moaning, in the kitchen.

Sullen, with the Melekhovs' ungracious look, Mishatka timidly came towards the bed. The sharp change which had occurred in his mother's face made her almost a stranger, unrecognizable. Natalya drew her son towards her and felt his little heart pounding, like that of a trapped sparrow.

"Bend down to me, little son! Closer!" she asked.

She whispered something into his ear, then pushed him away, questioningly gazed into his eyes, compressed her quivering lips, and, forcing a miserable, tormented smile, said: "You won't forget? You'll tell him?"

"I shan't forget." Mishatka clutched his mother's forefinger, squeezed it in his hot little fist, held it tightly for a second, then let it go. As he stepped away from the bed, for some reason he walked on tiptoe, balancing himself with his arms.

Natalya watched him to the door, then silently turned to the wall.

She died at noon.

XVII

Many were Grigory's thoughts and memories during the two days' journey from the front to his native village. Afraid to remain alone in the steppe with his grief, and his constant thoughts of Natalya, he took Prokhor Zykov with him. As soon as they were clear of the village in which his squadron was quartered, Grigory turned to talking of the war, recalling how he had served in the 12th Regiment on the Austrian front, how they had marched into Rumania, how they had fought the Germans. He talked on and on without stopping, recalling all kinds of absurd incidents in which their comrades of the regiment had been involved, and laughing. . . .

At first, amazed at Grigory's unusual garrulity, the simple-minded Prokhor took astonished sidelong

glances at him. But then he guessed that Grigory was trying to find relief from his oppressive thoughts in these memories of past days, and helped to keep the conversation going with perhaps unnecessary effort. As he was telling of the time he had spent in Chernigov Hospital, Prokhor happened to glance at Grigory and saw the tears streaming down his swarthy cheeks. Prokhor respectfully dropped back a few paces and rode behind for half an hour. Then he again drew level and tried to talk about some casual, insignificant matter. But Grigory did not take up the conversation. So they trotted along until noonday, in silence, side by side, stirrup to stirrup.

Grigory hurried along desperately. Despite the heat he kept his horse at a sharp trot, then broke into a gallop and only occasionally slowed down to a walking pace. He did not call a halt until noon, when the vertical rays of the sun began to burn intolerably. Then he stopped in a ravine and unsaddled his horse, turning him loose to graze. He went off into the shade, stretched himself face downward, and lay so until the heat began to abate. They fed the horses once with oats, but Grigory did not observe the proper feeding-times. By the end of the first day their horses, accustomed though they were to long marches, had deeply sunken flanks, and they no longer moved with the unwearying spirit of the morning. "We're going the right way to spoil the horses," Prokhor thought irritably. "Who ever rides like this? It's all very well for him, the devil! He's forcing his own animal along and he can get himself another any time he likes. But where could I get a mount? He'll gallop the horses

to death, and then we'll have to go on foot all the rest of the way to Tatarsky, or else drag along on a requisitioned wagon."

Next morning he could keep silent no longer and at last said to Grigory: "Anyone would think you'd never owned your own horse! Who ever would gallop like this, day and night, without a rest? Look how the horses are worn out! Let's give them a proper feed when evening comes, at any rate."

"Keep up, don't lag behind!" Grigory answered absent-mindedly.

"I can't keep up with you; my horse is dead beat. Couldn't we have a rest?"

Grigory did not answer. For half an hour they trotted along without exchanging a word, then Prokhor resolutely announced: "Let's give them a breather at least! I'm not going to ride on any farther like this. Do you hear?"

"Whip him up! Whip him up!"

"But how long are we to go on whipping him up? Until he pegs out?"

"Don't argue!"

"Have pity, Grigory Panteleyevich! I don't want to flay my horse, but things are coming to such a pass—"

"Well, then, halt, and damn you! Look for a spot with good grass."

The telegram had been wandering in search of Grigory through all the districts of the Khoper Region, and it arrived too late. He reached home on the third day after Natalya was buried. He dismounted at the wicket-gate. Dunya ran out of the house and burst

into sobs. He embraced her hurriedly and said, knitting his brows: "Give the horse a good long walk. . . . Now, don't bellow!" Turning to Prokhor, he ordered: "Ride home! If you're wanted I'll let you know."

Holding Mishatka and Polyushka by the hands, Ilyinichna came out to the steps to welcome her son.

Grigory snatched up the children in his arms and said in a quivering voice: "Now, don't cry! Now, no tears! My darlings! So you're left motherless? Now, now. . . . Your mummy's left us in the lurch. . . ."

But he himself had difficulty in choking back his sobs as he went into the house and greeted his father.

"We couldn't save her—" Pantelei said, and at once limped off into the passage.

Ilyinichna led Grigory into the best room and told him about Natalya. The old woman did not want to tell all the truth, but Grigory asked:

"Why did she take it into her head not to have the child? Do you know?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well?"

"She had called on your—that . . . the day before. And Aksinya told her everything."

"Aha! So that's it!" Grigory flushed heavily, and his eyes dropped.

He came out looking older, and very pale; soundlessly working his bluish, quivering lips, he sat down at the table, took the children on his knees and fondled them for some time. Then he took out a piece of greyish, dusty sugar from his field-pack, broke it on his palm with a knife, and smiled guiltily. "That's all I've been able to bring you. . . . That's the sort of

father you've got.... Well, run into the yard and call your grandad."

"Will you visit the grave?" Ilyinichna asked him.

"Later, when I can get the chance.... The dead never take offence.... How are Mishatka and Polyushka? Are they all right?"

"They cried a lot the first day, specially Polyushka.... But now it's just as though they'd come to some agreement, and they never talk about her in front of us. But last night I heard Mishatka crying quietly. He'd put his head under the pillow so as not to be heard.... I went to him and asked: 'What's the matter, darling? Would you like to come and lie with me?' But he says: 'It's all right, Granny; I must have been crying in my sleep....' You talk to them, have pity on them. Yesterday morning I heard them talking to each other in the passage. Polyushka was saying: 'She'll come back to us. She's young, and young people don't die.' They're still foolish, but their little hearts ache as though they were grown up.... I expect you're hungry. Sit down and I'll get something ready for you; what are you sitting dumb for?"

Grigory went into the best room. He behaved as though he had found his way there for the first time in his life: he looked attentively around the walls and rested his gaze on the bed. It had been made, and its pillows were puffed up. On that bed Natalya had died, from that bed her voice had sounded for the last time. He imagined her saying good-bye to the children, kissing them, and perhaps making the sign of the cross over them. And once more, as at the moment when he had read the telegram telling of her death,

he felt a sharp, stabbing pain in his heart, a muffled ringing in his ears.

Every little thing in the house reminded him of Natalya. His memories of her were indestructible and tormenting. For some reason he went from room to room, visiting them all, then hurriedly went out, almost ran on to the steps. The pain in his heart seared more and more. Sweat beaded his forehead. Fearfully pressing his palm against his left breast, he went down the steps, thinking: "This old grey nag has galloped up a steep hill or two!"

Dunya was walking his horse about the yard. By the granary the horse resisted the rein and halted to sniff at the earth, stretching out its neck and rolling back its upper lip, laying bare the yellow plates of its teeth. Then it snorted and awkwardly bent its forelegs. Dunya pulled on the rein, but the animal paid no attention and began to lie down.

"Don't let him roll over!" Pantelei shouted from the stable. "Can't you see he's saddled? Why didn't you unsaddle him, you little fool?"

Unhurriedly, still listening to the thumping in his chest, Grigory went up to the horse, removed the saddle, and forced a smile as he said to Dunya:

"Father still shouting?"

"As usual!" Dunya said with an answering smile.

"Lead him about a little longer, Sister."

"He's quite dry now; but I will if you want me to."

"Let him have a roll if he likes, don't stop him."

"Now, now, Brother. . . Grieving?"

"What did you expect?" Grigory answered chokingly.

Touched with compassion, Dunya kissed him on the shoulder and, moved to the point of tears, she swiftly turned and led the horse to the cattle-yard.

Grigory went across to his father, who was diligently raking dung out of the stable.

"I'm getting the place ready for your horse," the old man said.

"Why didn't you tell me? I'd have cleaned it out myself."

"A fine idea! Why, am I helpless? My boy, I'm like a flint lock; there's no wearing me out! I can still hop around a bit! Tomorrow I'm thinking of going out to sow the rye. Are you staying for long?"

"A month."

"Now, that's fine! Shall we go out to the fields? You'll find it easier if you're working...."

"I'd already thought of that myself."

The old man threw down the pitchfork, wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve, and said with quiet sincerity:

"Let's go into the house, and you have some dinner. You can never get away from it—sorrow, I mean. It's no good running away and it's no good trying to hide from it. That's how it is...."

Ilyinichna laid the table and gave Grigory a clean hand-towel. And yet again Grigory recalled: "In the old days Natalya waited on me." To hide his feelings he attacked the food vigorously. He gave his father a grateful look when the old man brought a ewer of home-made vodka, its neck stuffed with a bunch of hay, from the cellar.

"We'll drink in memory of the dead—may she rest in heaven!" Pantelei said in a firm tone.

They each drank a glass. Without waiting the old man filled the glasses again and sighed.

"Two of the family gone in one year.... Death's taken a fancy to our house."

"Don't let's talk about that, Father!" Grigory asked.

He drank his second glass at one gulp, chewed slowly at a piece of dried fish, and waited for the drink to go to his head and stifle his unwelcome thoughts.

"The rye's fine this year. And our sowings are far better than anybody else's!" Pantelei said boastfully. In that very boastfulness, in the very tone of his father's voice, Grigory detected a forced and studied note.

"But how about the wheat?"

"The wheat? It's been nipped a bit with the frost, but it's not too bad, it'll be a middling harvest. The hard wheat now—others have done well with that, but as luck would have it, we didn't happen to sow any. But I don't mind overmuch. With such destruction all around, what can you do with grain? You can't sell it, and you can't keep it in the bins. When the front comes back this way, the comrades will carry it all off, they'll lick the place bare. But don't you worry; even without this year's harvest we've got grain enough for a couple of years. Praise be, we've got our bins full to the lids and some more elsewhere...." The old man winked craftily and said: "You ask Darya how much we've buried for a rainy day! The hole's your height deep, and half as wide again as your

arms outstretched, and we filled it to the brim! This accursed life has made us poor, but we used to be well off once, you know. . . ." The old man laughed drunkenly, but after a moment he stroked his beard with dignity and said in a serious, business-like tone: "Maybe you're thinking about your mother-in-law, so I tell you I haven't forgotten her, and I've helped them in their need. Before she had time to say a word I'd filled a wagon with grain, not stopping to measure it, and took it to her. Your dead Natalya was very pleased, she cried when she heard about it. . . . Shall we put away a third glass, Son? You're the only joy left to me now."

"All right, pour it out!" Grigory assented, pushing his glass across the table.

At that moment Mishatka came up timidly, edging his way to the table. He climbed on to his father's knee and, awkwardly putting his left arm around Grigory's neck, gave him a hearty kiss on the lips.

"What's that for, my son?" Grigory asked, deeply moved. He looked into the child's tear-filled eyes and tried to avoid breathing vodka into his son's face.

Mishatka answered in a low voice:

"When Mummy was lying in the best room. . . when she was still alive, she called me to her and told me: 'When your father comes, kiss him for me and tell him to have pity on you.' She said something else, too, but I've forgotten. . . ."

Grigory set down his glass and turned away to the window. There was a long, oppressive silence in the room.

"Shall we drink up?" Pantelei asked in a low tone.

"I don't want any more." Grigory lifted his son down from his knee, rose, and hurriedly made for the porch.

"Wait a bit, Son, how about your meat? We've got boiled chicken, and pancakes!" Ilyinichna rushed to the stove; but Grigory had already slammed the door behind him.

He wandered about aimlessly from the cattle-yard to the stable. When he saw his horse, he thought: "I ought to take him for a bath." He went under the eaves of the shed. By the harvester standing ready for mowing, he saw pine chips, shavings, and a piece of crooked board lying on the ground. "Father made the coffin for Natalya," he decided, and hurriedly strode back to the steps of the house.

Yielding to his son's demand, Pantelei hastily made ready, harnessed the horses to the harvester, and loaded a small keg of water on to the platform. He and Grigory drove out to the fields that night.

XVIII

Grigory suffered not only because in his own way he had loved Natalya and had grown used to her during the six years they had lived together, but also because he felt responsible for her death. If Natalya had acted on her threat to take the children and go to live with her mother, if she had died there, hating her faithless husband and unreconciled with him, Grigory might not have felt the burden of his loss so deeply, and doubtless he would not have been so painfully racked

with remorse. But his mother told him Natalya had forgiven him everything, and that she had loved him and spoken of him until her last moment. And the knowledge added to his suffering, burdened his conscience with incessant reproach, forced him to see the past years and all his conduct in a new light.

There had been a time when he felt nothing but cold indifference and even hostility to his wife. But of recent years he had come to feel very differently towards her. The children had been chiefly responsible for changing his attitude to her.

Grigory had not always felt that profound fatherly feeling for them which developed in later days. When he came home from the front for short periods of leave, he caressed and fondled them, almost from a sense of duty and to please their mother, but he could not even watch Natalya and her violent demonstrations of maternal feeling without a sense of distrustful amazement. He did not understand how anyone could love those tiny, noisy creatures so self-forgetfully, and more than once while Natalya was still breast-feeding them he told her at night with chagrin and a sneer in his tone: "What makes you jump up so madly? You're on your feet before they've had time to cry. Let them kick and shout a bit; I don't suppose they'll cry tears of gold!" The children were no less indifferent to him, but as they grew older, their attachment to their father grew also. Their love aroused a response in him, and his feeling for them was extended to their mother.

After the break with Aksinya, Grigory had never seriously thought of leaving his wife; never, not even

when they came together again, had he thought of Aksinya as taking the place of the mother of his children. He did not mind living with them both, loving each of them in a different way. But now he had lost his wife he abruptly felt alienated from Aksinya and was suddenly filled with mute anger against her for having betrayed their relations and so driven Natalya to her death.

Try as he would to forget his sorrow, as he worked in the fields he inevitably returned to it in thought. He wore himself out with work, he did not climb out of the harvester seat for hours, yet he still recalled Natalya; his memory persistently resurrected various long-past frequently insignificant incidents of their life together, their talks together. He had but to remove the bridle from his willing memory for a moment, and the living, smiling Natalya would arise before him once more. He recalled her figure, her walk, her way of tidying her hair, her smile, the intonation of her voice.

On the third day they began to harvest the barley. At midday, when Pantelei halted the horses, Grigory climbed down from the harvester seat, laid the short pitchfork on the floorboards, and said: "I want to go home for an hour or so, Father."

"What for?"

"I just want to see the children. . . ."

"All right, off with you," the old man willingly agreed. "And meantime we'll be doing some stacking."

Grigory at once unharnessed his horse from the harvester, mounted it, and rode at a walking pace over the yellow, brushy stubble towards the high-

road. "Tell him to have pity on you!" Natalya's voice sounded in his ears. He closed his eyes, dropped the rein, and, lost in memories, let the horse take its own way.

In the deep-blue heaven rare, wind-scattered clouds hung almost motionless. Rooks were hopping with half-spread wings over the stubble. They settled in flocks on the stacks; beak to beak the old ones fed the young, newly-fledged birds which still rose uncertainly on the wing. Over the harvested acres the rooks' croaking blended into a steady groan.

Grigory's horse tried to pick its way along the side of the road, occasionally tearing up and chewing clumps of clover as it went. Its loose bit jingled. Twice, seeing horses in the distance, it came to a halt and neighed; and then Grigory roused himself and urged the animal on, while with unseeing eyes he gazed over the steppe, the dusty road, the yellow sprinkle of stacks, the greenish-brown plots or ripened millet.

As soon as Grigory reached home the glum-looking Christonya put in an appearance. Despite the heat, he was dressed in an English cloth tunic and broad riding-breeches. He walked in, leaning on an enormous, freshly trimmed ash stick, and greeted Grigory:

"I've dropped in to see you. I heard about your trouble. So they've buried Natalya Mironovna?"

"How did you get back from the front?" Grigory asked, pretending not to hear Christonya's question, gladly surveying his awkwardly built, slightly bowed figure.

"They sent me home to get better after a wound. I

had two bullets at once score me across the belly. And they're still stuck there, near my guts it looks like, damn them! And that's why I'm using a stick, you see?"

"Where did they make that mess of you?"

"Close to Balashov."

"Did you capture it? And how did you get your packet?"

"We were making an attack. Balashov was taken, and Povorino too. I was there."

"Well, tell me what regiment you're with, and who else of the village is with you. Sit down; have a smoke?"

Grigory was delighted to see a fresh face, to have an opportunity to talk with someone outside the family who had had nothing to do with his suffering. Christonya revealed some understanding and guessed that Grigory did not want his sympathy. He willingly but slowly began to tell how Balashov was captured and how he got his wound. Smoking an enormous cigarette, he said in his thick deep voice:

"We were advancing on foot through sunflowers. The Reds were firing at us with their machine-guns and artillery, and of course with rifles too, that goes without saying. I'm easily picked out, among the others I'm like a goose among chickens; no matter how low I bend, anyone can see me; well, and they—the bullets, I mean—found me all right. For that matter, it's a good job I'm a man of full height, for if I'd been shorter they'd have caught me right in the head! It seems they were spent bullets, but the moment they struck me, everything in my belly began

to grumble, and they were both so hot, damn it, as if they'd come out of a stove. I put my hand to the spot, and I could feel them inside me, rolling about under the skin like a couple of cysts, one close to the other. Well, I started feeling at them with my fingers and then down I went. "This is a poor joke," I thought, 'to hell with such jokes! Better keep still or another might come flying, sharper than the others, and go right through me.' Well, so I lay there. And I felt them—the bullets, I mean, from time to time. They were still there, one close to the other. And I began to get the wind up, for I thought they might make their way into my belly, and then what? They'd go rolling about among my guts, and then how would the doctors ever find them? And besides, they wouldn't be any pleasure to me. Any man's body, even mine, is watery inside; the bullets would go wandering into my bowels, and then I'd go walking about rattling like a post-bell. It would put me right out of order. I lay and twisted off a head of sunflower and ate the seeds, but I still couldn't get over my fright. Our line had gone on. Well, and when Balashov was taken, I managed to get there somehow. Then I was in the field hospital at Tishanka. The doctor there was as cocky as a sparrow. He kept asking me: 'Shall we cut out the bullets?' But I lay thinking it over. . . . I asked him: 'Your Excellency, can they get lost in my inside?' 'No,' he said, 'they can't.' Well, then I thought, I'm not going to let them be cut out! I know that game! I'd be sent back to my regiment. 'No,' I said, 'Your Excellency, I won't have them cut out. I like it better with them inside. I want

to carry them home to show my wife, and they're no bother to me, they're not a great weight.' He swore at me good and hard, but he let me go home on sick-leave for a week."

Grigory smiled as he listened to the artless story, and asked: "What regiment have you got into?"

"The 4th."

"Who else from the village is with you?"

"Quite a lot: Anikushka, Beskhlebnov, Akim Kolveidin, Syomka Miroshnikov, Tikhon Gorbachev."

"Well, and how are the Cossacks? Not complaining?"

"They're fed up with the officers, it looks like. They've put such filthy swine over us there's no living with them. And they're almost all Russians; there isn't a Cossack among them!"

As he spoke, Christonya pulled down the short sleeve of his tunic and examined and stroked the excellent cloth of his English breeches as though he could hardly believe that he was wearing such good material.

"But, you know, I couldn't find boots to fit my feet," he said meditatively. "The people who live in the English country haven't got such big feet under them.... We sow and eat wheat, but I expect in England it's like in Russia; they only have rye to eat. How can they have such big feet as mine? They've clothed and shod all our squadron and sent us scented cigarettes; but all the same, things are bad."

"What's bad?" Grigory asked with interest.

"It's seems all right outside, but inside it's bad." Christonya smiled. "You know, the Cossacks want to

get out of fighting again. So nothing will come of this war. They've been saying they won't go farther than the Khoper Region."

When he had said good-bye to Christonya, after a moment's reflection Grigory decided: "I'll stay here a week and then go back to the front. I shall die of misery here." He stayed at home until evening. Remembering the days of his childhood he made Mishatka a windmill of reeds, fashioned a sparrow-snare out of horse hair, expertly made his daughter a tiny carriage with wheels that turned and a centre-pole painted in extraordinary colours, and even tried to make a doll out of rags. But nothing came of that; Dunya had to help to finish the doll.

At first the children, to whom Grigory had never been so attentive before, were distrustful of his intentions. But afterwards they would not leave him for a minute, and late in the afternoon, when Grigory was making ready to ride back to the fields, Mishatka declared with tears in his voice:

"You're always like that! No sooner are you here than you leave us again. . . . Take your snare, and the mill, and the rattle with you. Take them all; I don't want them."

Grigory took his son's little hands in his own great fists and said: "If that's how you feel, let's settle it this way. You're a Cossack, and you'll ride out with me to the fields. We'll mow the barley and we'll stack it; you'll sit with Grandfather on the harvester, you'll drive the horses. And the grasshoppers you'll find out there in the grass! The birds you'll see in the ravines! But Polyushka will stay at home with Grand-

mother. She won't mind. She's a girl, and it's her job to sweep the floors, and bring Grandmother water from the Don in a little pail, the women have got all kinds of jobs to do at home. Will you come?"

"Oh yes!" Mishatka exclaimed rapturously. And his eyes shone at the prospect.

"Where are you taking him to?" Ilyinichna tried to object. "I don't know what you're thinking of! Where's he going to sleep? And who's going to look after him out there? God help us, he'll go too close to the horses and get kicked, or else a snake'll bite him. Don't go with your father, darling; you stay at home!" She turned to her grandson.

But Mishatka's narrowed eyes suddenly blazed ominously (exactly like his grandfather's when the old man was losing his temper), and he clenched his little fists, and shouted in a tearful high-pitched voice:

"Grandma, shut up! I'm going, whatever happens! Don't listen to her, Daddy!"

With a laugh Grigory lifted his son in his arms, and reassured Ilyinichna:

"He'll sleep with me. We'll walk the horse all the way there. I shan't let him fall. Get his clothes ready, Mother, and don't be afraid; I'll see he's safe and sound, and I'll bring him back all right tomorrow evening."

And thus Grigory and Mishatka struck up a friendship.

During the fortnight he spent in Tatarsky, Grigory saw Aksinya only three times, and then he had only glimpses of her. With her native sense and tact she avoided a meeting, realizing that it would be better

for her not to come within his sight. Woman-like, she realized his mood, realized that any incautious and untimely demonstration of her feelings for him might set him against her and throw a cloud over their relations. She waited for Grigory to speak to her himself. The moment came a day before his departure for the front. He was driving back late from the fields with a wagon-load of grain, and in the dusk he met Aksinya by the lane nearest to the steppe. She bowed when still some distance away and faintly smiled. Her smile was challenging and expectant. He answered her bow, but could not pass her by in silence.

"How are you getting on?" he asked, imperceptibly pulling on the reins, slowing the horses down from their fast walking pace.

"Quite well, thank you, Grigory Panteleyevich."

"How is it we haven't seen anything of you?"

"I've been out in the fields. I've a lot to do single-handed."

Mishatka was sitting with Grigory in the wagon. Possibly for that reason Grigory did not halt the horses and did not stop for further conversation. He had driven on several paces when, hearing a call, he turned. Aksinya was standing by the fence.

"Are you staying long in the village?" she asked, agitatedly plucking the petals of a daisy.

"I'm off any day now."

By the way she hesitated for a second, it was evident that she wanted to ask something more. For some reason she did not, but waved her hand and hurriedly walked on to the commonland, not once looking back.

XIX

The sky was overcast with clouds. A rain so fine that it seemed to have been sieved was sprinkling down. The young aftermath, the scrub, and the bushes of wild thorn scattered about the steppe were glistening.

Highly indignant at his premature departure from the village, Prokhor rode along in silence and hardly spoke to Grigory all the way back to the regiment. Beyond a certain village they fell in with three mounted Cossacks. The men were riding in a row, urging their horses on with their heels, and talking energetically among themselves. One of them, elderly and red-bearded, dressed in a peasant's grey homespun coat, recognized Grigory and said in a loud voice to his companions: "But that's Melekhov, brothers!" As they drew level with Grigory he reined in his high-standing bay horse.

"Our greetings to you, Grigory Panteleyevich," he cried.

"Greetings!" Grigory answered, vainly trying to recall where he had met this red-bearded, sullen-looking Cossack before.

Evidently the man had only recently been raised to the rank of cornet and, in order not to be taken for a rank-and-file Cossack, he had sewn his new shoulder-straps on his peasant's coat.

"Don't you know me?" he asked, riding right up to Grigory, stretching out his hand, and breathing vodka into Grigory's face. An idiotic self-satisfaction beamed on the face of this newly-cooked cornet; his

small blue eyes sparkled, and his lips twisted into a grin under his red moustache. Grigory was amused by the absurd appearance of this officer in a peasant's coat. Not attempting to hide his smile, he answered:

"No, I don't. I must have met you when you were still a rank-and-file Cossack. Have you been made a cornet recently?"

"You've hit the mark! It's just a week since they raised me to my present rank. But we met at one of Kudinov's staff meetings, some time about Lady Day it was, I think. You saved me from a little bit of trouble then, do you remember? Hey, Trifon! Ride on slowly, I'll catch up with you!" he shouted to the other Cossacks, who had halted a little way off.

After some difficulty Grigory recalled his previous meeting with the red-haired cornet and Kudinov's comment on him: "He never misses when he fires, he can shoot hares in flight with his rifle, he's a devil in a fight, a good scout, but a babe in intelligence." The man had commanded a squadron during the rising, and had made some blunder. Kudinov had wanted to deal sternly with him, but Grigory had intervened, and he had been pardoned and left with the rank of squadron commander.

"Come from the front?" Grigory asked.

"Yes; I'm going on furlough from Novokhopersk. I've ridden a hundred versts out of my way to call on kinsmen of mine. I've got a good memory, Grigory Panteleyevich! Don't refuse me the pleasure of treating you. I've got a couple of bottles of hundred per cent liquor in my pack. Let's open them on the spot, shall we?"

Grigory flatly refused, but he accepted the bottle the man offered him as a present.

"You should have been there! Cossacks and officers were loaded down with goods!" the cornet boastfully declared. "I was in Balashov too. We captured the place and made straight for the railway, where we found all the tracks crowded with trucks. One truck was full of sugar, a second full of uniforms, and a third had all sorts of things in it. Some of the Cossacks carried off up to forty sets of clothing. And afterwards, when we went to shake up the Jews, you'd have laughed. In my half-squadron one clever Jew-catcher collected eighteen watches, ten of them gold. He hung them all over his chest, just as though he was the richest merchant in the land. And the rings and bracelets he'd got—you couldn't have counted them! He had two or three on each finger..."

Grigory pointed to the man's swollen saddle-bags and asked:

"And what's that you've got?"

"Why—all sorts of things."

"So you went looting too?"

"You needn't call it that.... We didn't loot, we won it legally. Our regimental commander said: 'Take the town and it's yours for two days.' And am I any worse than the others? I took legal stuff, whatever came to my hand. Others did much worse."

"Fine fighters!" Grigory gazed at the cornet in disgust, and added: "The likes of you lurk under the bridges on the high-roads, but you don't fight! You've turned the war into a looting expedition. Ah, you scum! You've got a new trade! But don't you think

that some day or other you, and your commander too, will be flayed alive for this?"

"For what?"

"For all that."

"But who's going to do the flaying?"

"A superior officer."

The man smiled sarcastically and said:

"But they're all the same! We only take stuff in our saddle-bags or our wagons, but they're sending away whole train-loads of baggage."

"Why, have you seen them?"

Have I seen them! I myself convoyed one such baggage train to Yaryzhenskaya. There was a whole wagon-load of silver dishes, cups, and spoons. Some of the officers flew at us with: 'What have you got there? Here, show us!' But when I said it was the personal property of General So-and-so they went off empty-handed."

"Who is this general?" Grigory asked, narrowing his eyes and nervously fingering the reins.

The man smiled craftily and answered:

"I've forgotten his name. What is it? God help me to remember! No, it's gone; I can't recall it. But there's no point in your swearing, Grigory Panteleyevich. God's truth, everybody's doing it. Compared to the others I'm like a lamb to wolves. I took very little, but others stripped people naked in the very middle of the street and raped the Jew girls wherever they came upon them. I didn't go in for such things. I've got my own lawful wife, and what a wife! She's a stallion, not a woman! No, you've got no cause to be angry with me. Wait a bit; where are you off to?"

Grigory coldly nodded in farewell to the man and put his horse into a trot, saying to Prokhor: "Come on!"

On the road they met more and more Cossacks riding off on furlough in ones and twos and in groups. Quite often they passed wagons drawn by a pair of horses, with their loads covered by tarpaulins or blankets carefully tied down. Cossacks in new summer tunics and Red Army khaki trousers trotted behind the wagons, standing in their stirrups. Their dusty, sun-burnt faces were animated and cheerful. But when they saw Grigory they hurried past as quickly as possible, riding in silence, raising their hands to the peaks of their caps as though at a command, and fell to talking again only when they had put a respectable distance between themselves and Grigory.

"Here come the merchants!" Prokhor jested when in the distance he saw horsemen convoying a wagon loaded with plunder.

But not all the men they met going on furlough were weighed down with loot. Halting to water the horses at a well in one of the villages, Grigory heard singing coming from the next yard. Judging by the fine, youthfully clear voices, it was a group of young Cossacks, singing.

"Giving a farewell party to a soldier, I should say," Prokhor said as he drew up a pail of water. The bottle of liquor they had drunk the evening before had put him in the mood for a drinking bout, and so, hurriedly watering the horses, he suggested with a laugh:

"What do you think, Panteleyevich, shall we go and join them? Maybe we'll get one for the road, too.

The hut's got a reed thatch, but you can tell they're rich."

Grigory agreed to go and see how the young Cossack was being speeded on his way. Tying the horses to the fence, he and Prokhor went into the yard. Four saddled horses were standing by circular mangers under the eaves of a shed. A lad with an iron measure filled to the brim with oats came out of the granary. He glanced at Grigory and went to the whinnying horses. A song came floating round the corner of the hut. A high, vibrating tenor was singing:

*Along that road no foot had trod,
No foot had trod...*

A thick, smoky bass voice repeated the last words and blended with the tenor, then further voices joined in harmony, and the song flowed on majestically, expansively, and mournfully. Grigory did not want to interrupt the singers, so he touched Prokhor's sleeve and whispered:

"Wait a bit, don't let them see you. Let them finish."

"It isn't a send-off. The Yelanskaya Cossacks always sing like that. But they can sing, the devils!" Prokhor remarked approvingly and spat with annoyance: it looked as though his expectation of a drink would go unrealized.

The pleasant tenor told to the end the story of the Cossack who disgraced himself on active service:

*No foot had trod, no horse's trace was seen,
But once along that road a Cossack
regiment did ride,*

"How beautifully and how sorrowfully you sing, my dears! And I expect every one of you has got a mother, and I expect, when she thinks of her son and how he's perishing in the war, she cries her eyes out." Flashing the yellow whites of her eyes at Grigory as he greeted the crowd, she suddenly said angrily: "And you, Your Excellency, you lead such flowers to their death, don't you? You're getting them killed off in the war!"

"We're being killed off ourselves, old woman," Grigory answered moodily.

Embarrassed by the arrival of a strange officer, the Cossacks jumped nimbly to their feet, pushing aside the plates with remnants of food that lay on the steps, and tidying their tunics, rifle-straps, and belts. They had been singing without even taking the rifles from their shoulders. The very oldest of them did not look more than twenty-five.

"Where are you from?" Grigory asked, running his eyes over the men's fresh, youthful faces.

"From a regiment . . ." a snub-nosed youngster with humorous eyes answered irresolutely.

"I mean, where were you born, what is your native district? You're not local men, are you?"

"We're Yelanskaya men. We're going on furlough, Your Excellency."

Grigory recognized the solo singer by his voice and smiled as he asked: "You were the soloist, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, you've got a fine voice. But what were you singing for? For joy? You don't look to be drunk!"

A tall, fair youngster with a dashing, dusty forelock, and a deep flush on his swarthy cheeks, glanced sidelong at the old women and 'reluctantly answered with an embarrassed smile:

"What joy do you think we've got? Need is what makes us sing. Life isn't too good in these parts, they don't feed you too well—just a hunk of bread, and that's all. And so we hit upon the idea of singing. As soon as we start, all the women come running to listen; we strike up some sad song, and they're touched and bring us a lump of fat, or a pipkin of milk, or something else that's good to eat. . . ."

"We're sort of priests, Captain! We sing and collect alms!" said the soloist, winking at his comrades. His humorous eyes narrowed in a smile.

One of the Cossacks took a greasy paper out of his breast pocket and held it out to Grigory, saying:

"Here's our furlough paper."

"What do I want it for?"

"You might think we were deserting."

"You can show it when you fall in with a punitive detachment," Grigory said with some annoyance. But nonetheless, before leaving them he advised them: "Ride at night, and put up somewhere each day. Your paper's useless; see you don't get into trouble with it. Is it stamped?"

"Our squadron hasn't got a stamp."

"Well, you take my advice if you don't want to be thrashed with ramrods by the Kalmyks."

Some three versts outside the village, not far from a small wood which reached to the edge of the road,

Grigory again saw two horsemen riding towards him. They halted and stood gazing for a moment, then turned sharply into the wood.

"They haven't got any papers," Prokhor reasoned. "Did you see the way they turned off into the trees? Why do they have to ride in the day-time, the devils!"

During the day several other men turned off the road and hurried to hide when they saw Grigory and Prokhor. One elderly Cossack on foot, stealthily making his way homeward, plunged into a field of sunflowers and crouched down like a hare on the edge of the field. As they rode past him Prokhor rose in his stirrups and shouted:

"Hey, countryman, that's not the way to hide! You've hidden your head, but you're showing your arse!" And with a pretence of fury he shouted: "Well, out you come! Let's see your documents!"

The Cossack jumped up and, bending double, ran off through the sunflowers. Prokhor laughed uproariously and was about to touch up his horse to chase the man. But Grigory halted him:

"Don't play the fool! Let him go to the devil; he'll go on running until he's broken-winded as it is. He may even die of fright. . ."

"You're all wrong! You couldn't catch that man with borzois! He won't stop galloping for a good ten versts. Did you see the way he tore through the sunflowers? Where does a man get all that energy from at such times, I'd like to know." He expressed some decidedly disapproving opinions about deserters generally, then remarked:

"The way they ride in bunches! Like beans out of a sack. You look out, Panteleyevich, or before long you and I will be holding the front by ourselves."

The closer they drew to the front, the more Gri-gory saw signs of the demoralization of the Don Army. The demoralization had set in just at the moment when, reinforced by the insurgents, the army had achieved its greatest successes on the Northern Front. Already its forces were quite incapable of opening a decisive offensive and smashing enemy resistance, and could not even face any serious attack.

In the district centres and villages where the front-line reserves were quartered, the officers were carousing incessantly; baggage trains of all kinds groaned with property looted but not yet dispatched to the rear; no unit had more than sixty per cent of its full complement; Cossacks were going on furlough without permission and the Kalmyk punitive detachments scouring the steppe were not strong enough to hold up the flood of mass desertion. In the occupied villages of the Saratov Province the Cossacks were behaving like conquerors in foreign territory; they were pillaging the population, raping the women, destroying the grain stocks, slaughtering the cattle. Reinforcements of callow youths and men over fifty were being drafted into the army. In the advancing companies there was open talk of unwillingness to fight, while the Cossacks in the forces moving towards Voronezh were flatly refusing to obey the officers. Rumour had it that instances of officers being murdered in the front-line positions were growing frequent.

Dusk was falling when Grigory halted for the night in a small village not far from Balashov. A Fourth Reserve Squadron of Cossacks drawn from older conscripts and an engineers' company of the Taganrog Regiment had occupied all the living quarters in the place. Grigory spent a good deal of time searching for quarters. He could have passed the night in the fields, as they usually did; but rain began to fall, Prokhor was shivering in one of his bouts of malaria, and so they had to spend the night somewhere under cover. At the entrance to the village an armoured car which had been put out of action by a shell stood by a large house surrounded with poplars. As Grigory rode past he read the still legible inscription on its green side: "Death to the White scum!" and, below it, the name of the vehicle—"Fury." Horses were snorting at the tether-posts in the yard, human voices were to be heard; in the garden behind the house a camp-fire was burning, and smoke was drifting over the green crowns of the trees. Lit up by the glare, Cossack figures moved about round the fire. The smell of burning straw and burned hogs' bristles hung in the wind.

Grigory dismounted and went into the house.

"Who's the master here?" he asked as he went into a low-ceilinged room filled with people.

"I am. What do you want?" A thickset peasant leaning against the stove looked round at Grigory, but did not change his position.

"Can we spend the night here? There are two of us."

"We're already packed like seeds in a watermelon," an elderly Cossack lying on a bench barked in a disgruntled tone.

"I wouldn't mind, but we have got rather a lot in here," the master said in an apologetic tone.

"We'll find room somehow. We can't spend the night in the rain, can we?" Grigory insisted. "I've got a sick orderly with me."

The Cossack lying on the bench grunted, dropped his feet to the floor, and, staring at Grigory, said in a different voice:

"Your Excellency, there's fourteen of us in two small rooms not counting the family, and the other room has been taken by a British officer with his two orderlies, and one of our officers is with them too."

"Maybe you could fit yourself up with them somehow," a second Cossack with a heavy sprinkle of grey in his beard, a non-commissioned officer, judging by his shoulder-straps, said in a friendly tone.

"No, I'd rather be here. I don't need much room, I'll lie on the floor. I shan't crowd you." Grigory removed his greatcoat, smoothed his hair with his palm, and sat down at the table. Prokhor went out to see to the horses.

Their voices must have been heard in the next room, for five minutes later the door opened and a smart little lieutenant appeared.

"Are you looking for somewhere to sleep?" he asked Grigory. Then, after a quick glance at Grigory's shoulder-straps, he smiled politely and suggested: "Won't you join us in our half, Squadron Commander? Lieutenant Campbell of the British Army and myself invite you, you'll find it more comfortable with us. My name is Shcheglov. And yours?" He shook hands with Grigory and asked: "Are you

from the front? Oh, you've been on leave! Come in, come in. We shall be glad of your company. You must be hungry and we can give you something to eat."

A St. George cross dangled on the lieutenant's immaculate green tunic, his parting was irreproachable, his boots had been carefully cleaned, his dark clean-shaven cheeks, his trim figure, everything about him smelled of cleanliness and eau-de-Cologne. He stepped aside to let Grigory pass and said:

"The door's on the left. Be careful, there's a box in the way."

A young powerfully built lieutenant with close-set grey eyes, and a bushy black moustache almost concealing the deep scar on his upper lip, rose to meet Grigory. The Russian lieutenant introduced them, saying something in English. The Englishman shook hands with Grigory and, glancing now at him, now at his interpreter, said a few words and motioned them to sit down.

Four camp-beds stood in a row across the middle of the room; boxes, kit-bags and leather suitcases were piled in a corner. A light machine-gun of a type unknown to Grigory lay on a large trunk along with a field-glasses case, cartridge boxes, and a carbine with a dark stock and a new, dully gleaming barrel.

The lieutenant said something in a low pleasant voice, glancing cordially at Grigory. Grigory could not understand the unfamiliar foreign speech but, realizing that he was the subject of conversation, felt slightly embarrassed. Listening to the Englishman with a smile, the Russian lieutenant rummaged in one of the suitcases and said:

"Lieutenant Campbell says he has a great respect for the Cossacks, he considers them fine cavalrymen and excellent fighters. Would you like something to eat? Do you drink? He says there's a growing danger. . . . Oh well, he talks all kinds of nonsense!" The lieutenant took several tins and two bottles of brandy out of the suitcase, then bent over it again, still interpreting: "He says he was very well received by the Cossack officers in Ust-Medveditskaya. They drank a huge barrel of Don wine. Everyone got rolling drunk and they had a very gay time with some school-girls. You know how it is! He considers it his pleasant duty to return their hospitality. You are to be the victim. Well, I'm sorry for you. . . . Do you drink?"

"Thanks, I do," Grigory said, glancing surreptitiously at his hands, which were black with the grime of road dust and harness leather.

The lieutenant put the tins on the table and opened them expertly with a knife.

"You know, he's just about worn me out, Captain, this English hog! He drinks from morning to night. Just pours it down! I don't mind drinking myself, but not on this Homeric scale—" he glanced with a smile at the Englishman then, to Grigory's surprise, blasphemed horribly. "He even drinks on an empty stomach!"

The British lieutenant nodded smilingly and said in broken Russian: "Yes, yes, we must drink your health!"

Grigory laughed and swept his hair back off his forehead. He liked the two men, and the British lieu-

tenant with his meaningless smile and absurd way of speaking Russian was magnificent.

Wiping the glasses, the lieutenant said: "I've been tagging around with him for two weeks now, what do you think of that? He's instructing our people to drive the tanks that have been attached to our Second Corps, and they've made me his interpreter. The trouble is I speak fluent English, it's been my downfall. . . . Our people drink, but not like this! You'll see for yourself what he's capable of. He can empty four or five bottles of brandy a day if he takes it gradually. And he's never drunk. He can even work after a dose like that. He's worn me out. There's something the matter with my stomach, I wake up in a terrible mood every day, and I'm so saturated in alcohol I'm afraid to sit near a lighted lamp. . . . It's the devil knows what!" While he spoke he filled two glasses to the brim but poured himself only a little.

Looking at the glasses and laughing, the Englishman began talking animatedly. The Russian lieutenant answered with his hand beseechingly on his heart and only occasionally a spark of impatience flared up for a second in his dark kindly eyes. Grigory chinked glasses with his hospitable hosts and drank the brandy in one gulp.

"Oh!" the Englishman exclaimed approvingly and, sipping his glass, looked contemptuously at his interpreter.

The English lieutenant's big workman's hands lay on the table. There were traces of engine grease in the pores of his skin, which was rough from the use of petrol and from old scars. His face, however, was

smoothly full and red. The contrast between face and hands was so great that to Grigory it seemed almost as if the lieutenant were wearing a mask.

"You're saving me," said the Russian lieutenant, filling his companions' glasses to the brim.

"Doesn't he drink alone?" asked Grigory.

"That's the whole trouble! He drinks alone in the morning, but in the evening he can't. Well, let's drink."

"Strong stuff..." Grigory only sipped his glass, but then, catching the Englishman's surprised glance, emptied the rest down his throat.

"He says you're a good fellow. He likes the way you drink."

"I wouldn't mind changing jobs with you," Grigory said smiling.

"I'm sure you would run away from it in a fortnight."

"From a soft job like yours?"

"I shall run away from this soft job anyhow."

"It's worse at the front."

"This is a front too. You may catch a bullet or a shell splinter out there, but it's not a certainty, whereas here I'll be getting d.t. for sure. Try some of this tinned fruit. Would you like some ham?"

"Thanks, I've got some."

"The British are good at this business. They don't feed their army as we do ours."

"Do we feed ours? Our army lives off the country."

"Quite true, unfortunately. It's a system of feeding your men that doesn't get you very far, especially

if you allow them to rob the population when and how they choose."

Grigory glanced keenly at the Russian lieutenant and asked: "Are you expecting to go far?"

"We're all going the same way, why do you ask?" The lieutenant did not notice the Englishman take the bottle and fill his glass to the brim.

"Now you'll have to drink it," Grigory smiled.

"Oh, my God!" the lieutenant looked at his glass and groaned. A delicate flush covered his cheeks.

The three men chinked glasses in silence and drank.

"Yes, we're all heading the same way, but we're travelling differently . . ." Grigory resumed, frowning as he tried vainly to stick his fork into a slippery apricot. "Some of us will get off sooner, some later, it's like being in a train. . . ."

"Don't you expect to travel to the last stop?"

Grigory felt that he was getting drunk, but the drink had not yet overpowered him. He replied with a laugh:

"I shan't have enough capital to buy me a ticket all the way. What about you?"

"Well, I'm in a different position. Even if I'm turned off, I'll go the rest of the way on foot!"

"Good luck to you then! Let's drink!"

"Nothing for it now. . . ."

The British lieutenant chinked glasses with Grigory and his interpreter and drank in silence, scarcely eating at all. His face had turned a brick red, his eyes were brighter and a deliberate slowness had appeared in his movements. Before they had finished the second bottle, he rose with an effort, strode firmly over to the

suitcases and returned carrying three more bottles of brandy. Placing them on the table, he smiled with the corners of his lips and said something in his deep voice.

"Lieutenant Campbell says we must prolong the pleasure. The devil take him! How do you feel?"

"I'm all right," Grigory assented.

"What a capacity the fellow has! In that English body of his there's the soul of a Russian merchant. I think I'm just about flush. . . ."

"You don't look it," Grigory lied.

"Don't I, by God! I'm as weak as a virgin. . . . But I can still live up to my responsibilities. Yes, and live up to them well!"

The Russian lieutenant had become visibly fuddled after drinking a full glass. His black eyes were oily and slightly squinting, the muscles of his face relaxed, his lips refused to obey him, nervous tremors pulsed in his smooth cheeks. The brandy had had a devastating effect on him. His face wore the expression of a bull in the slaughter-house, after a ten-pound hammer has descended on its skull.

"You're still in top form. You've got used to it and it doesn't seem to affect you at all," Grigory affirmed. He, too, was noticeably tipsy, but felt he could still drink a lot.

"Are you serious?" the Russian lieutenant said, brightening up. "Yes, I was feeling rather sour to start with, but now I'm ready for anything! Anything! I like you, Captain. There's something strong and sincere about you. I like it. Well, let us drink to the country of this drunken fool. I know, he's a beast, but

his country's a wonderful place. Britannia, rule the waves! Shall we drink? Not bottoms up though! To your country, Mr. Campbell!" The Russian lieutenant screwed up his face desperately and drank, then took a bite of ham. "A wonderful country, Squadron Commander. You just can't imagine it, but I've lived there. . . . Well, let's drink!"

"Whatever she's like, your own mother's always dearer to you than some one else's."

"We won't argue about that, let's drink."

"Let's."

"Our country has got to have the rot burned out of it with fire and sword, but we're helpless. It turns out we have no country. To the devil with it! Campbell doesn't believe we can deal with the Reds."

"Doesn't he?"

"No, he doesn't. He has a poor opinion of our army and praises the Reds."

"Has he been in battle?"

"Oh, yes! The Reds nearly captured him. Damn this brandy!"

"Strong stuff. Strong as spirits, isn't it?"

"Not quite. Campbell was saved by the cavalry, or they'd have got him. It was at Zhukov village. The Reds captured one of our tanks. . . . You look sad. What's the matter?"

"My wife died not long ago."

"That's terrible! Are there any children left?"

"Yes."

"To your children's health! I haven't got any, or perhaps I have. If I have, they're probably selling newspapers in the streets somewhere. . . . Campbell

has a fiancée in England. He writes to her regularly, twice a week. Probably writes a lot of rubbish. I almost hate him. What?"

"I didn't say anything. Why does he respect the Reds?"

"Who said he respects them?"

"You did."

"Impossible! He doesn't respect them, he couldn't, you're mistaken! But I'll ask him."

Campbell listened attentively to the pale and intoxicated lieutenant, then started giving a long answer in English. Without waiting for him to finish, Grigory asked:

"What's he babbling about?"

"He's seen their infantry charging tanks with nothing but bast shoes on their feet. Is that enough? He says the people can't be conquered. The fool! Don't you believe him."

"Why not?"

"The whole idea's wrong."

"But why?"

"He's drunk and he's talking rubbish. What does it mean—the people can't be conquered? Some of them can be destroyed and the rest be forced into obedience. How many bottles have we drunk now?" The Russian lieutenant slumped over the table, upsetting a tin of fruit, and sat for about ten minutes with his face on his arms, breathing heavily.

Outside the night was dark. Rain was beating on the shutters. A rumbling could be heard in the distance and Grigory could not make out whether it was thunder or the boom of artillery. Campbell sat sip-

ping his brandy, wrapped in a haze of cigar smoke. Grigory shook the interpreter and, getting unsteadily to his feet, said:

"Go on, ask him why the Reds are going to beat us?"

"Damn you!" the Russian lieutenant grunted.

"Go on, ask him!"

"Damn you! Go to the devil!"

"Ask him, I tell you!"

The Russian lieutenant looked at Grigory for a minute wild-eyed, then stammered out something to the attentive Campbell and again dropped his head on his arms. Campbell looked at him with a contemptuous smile, touched Grigory's sleeve and mutely tried to explain. He pushed an apricot stone to the middle of the table, set his big palm beside it and, clicking his tongue, suddenly covered the stone with his palm.

"Clever, aren't you! I could have told you that myself . . ." Grigory muttered thoughtfully to himself. Swaying on his feet, he embraced the hospitable British lieutenant, swept his arm over the table and made a bow. "Thanks for your hospitality! Good-bye. And you know what I'm going to tell you? Go home quick, before you get your head knocked off out here. That's the honest truth. Understand? You've got no call to be interfering in our affairs. Understand? Please go home, lad, or you'll get a pair of crutches out here!"

The lieutenant stood up and bowed, and again began to talk animatedly, glancing helplessly at his sleeping interpreter and slapping Grigory amiably on the back.

Grigory found the door latch with difficulty and staggered out into the porch. A fine slanting rain lashed his face. A flash of lightning illuminated the big yard, the wet fence, and the glistening leaves of the trees in the orchard. Going down the steps, Grigory slipped and fell, and as he picked himself up, he heard voices.

"Them officers still drinking?" someone asked striking a match in the passage.

And a hoarse voice rasped back:

"They'll drink . . . they'll drink till it chokes them."

XX

As in 1918, the Army of the Don, having advanced beyond the boundaries of the Khoper District, again lost its attacking impetus. The Cossack rebels of the upper Don, and many of the Khoper river Cossacks too, still did not want to fight outside the limits of the Don Region; also they were encountering stronger resistance from the Red Army units, which had been reinforced, and were now operating on territory where they enjoyed the sympathy of the local population. Once again the Cossacks were inclined to go over to the defensive, and no amount of cunning on the part of the White Army command, could force them to fight with the persistence they had recently displayed in their own region, even though the balance of forces on this sector was in their favour, for now the harassed Ninth Red Army with a force of 11,000 bayonets, 5,000 sabres, and 52 guns at its disposal was opposed

by Cossack corps totalling 14,400 bayonets, 10,600 sabres and 53 guns.

The most active operations took place on the flanks, particularly where units of the Kuban Volunteer Southern Army were in action. Simultaneously with its successful advance into the Ukraine, part of the Volunteer Army commanded by General Wrangel was exerting strong pressure on the Tenth Red Army, forcing it back, and in the face of strong resistance, moving in the direction of Saratov. On July 28th, the Kuban cavalry took the town of Kamyshin and captured a large number of the defending force. The counter-attack launched by the Tenth Red Army was repulsed. With its left flank threatened by a boldly manoeuvring Kuban cavalry division, the Tenth Army withdrew to the Borzenkovo-Latyshevo-Krasny Yar-Kamenka-Bannoye line. By this time the Tenth Army had 18,000 bayonets, 8,000 sabres and 132 guns, while the Volunteer Kuban Army had 7,600 bayonets, 10,750 sabres and 68 guns. In addition, the Whites were supported by tank units and also a considerable number of aeroplanes that were used both for reconnaissance and in battle. But neither his French aeroplanes, nor his British tanks and artillery could help Wrangel; he got no further than Kamyshin. And the prolonged, stubborn fighting that developed on this sector brought few changes in the line of the front.

At the end of July, the Red armies began preparing for a broad offensive on the central sector of the Southern Front. The Ninth and Tenth armies were combined into a striking force commanded by Shorin. As their reserve, they were to have two divisions drawn

from the Kazan and Saratov defence areas on the Eastern Front, while the striking force itself was to be strengthened with troops from the front-line reserve and the 56th Rifle Division. It was also planned to deliver a supplementary blow with forces of the Eighth Army supported by two additional divisions.

The offensive was timed to start in the first ten days of August. According to the plan of the Red Army high command, the Eighth and Ninth armies' attack was to be accompanied by encircling movements of the armies on the flanks, the Tenth Army being entrusted with the particularly responsible and complex task of engaging the enemy on the left bank of the Don and cutting off their main forces from the North Caucasus. In the west, part of the forces of the Fourteenth Army were to be employed in a bluff advance towards the Chaplino-Lozovaya line.

While the proposed regrouping was being carried out by the Ninth and Tenth armies, the White command, in order to wreck the offensive, was completing the formation of General Mamontov's corps, with which it was hoping to break through the front and make a deep raid in the rear of the Red armies. The success of Wrangel's army in the Tsaritsin direction had made it possible to extend Wrangel's front to the left, and thus shorten the Don Army Front so that several cavalry divisions could be withdrawn from it. On August 7th, 6,000 sabres, 2,800 bayonets and 3 four-gun batteries were concentrated in the Uryupinskaya District. On the 10th, General Mamontov's corps drove a wedge between the Eighth and Ninth Red armies and struck in the direction of Tambov.

The White command's original intention had been to support Mamontov's raid into the rear of the Red armies with General Konovalov's cavalry corps, but the heavy fighting that developed on the sector of the front held by Konovalov made it impossible to withdraw his corps for this purpose. This factor explains the limited nature of the task assigned to Mamontov, who was ordered to refrain from going too deep into the rear or dreaming of a march on Moscow, and to rejoin the main White army as soon as he had smashed the enemy's rear services and communications. Originally Mamontov and Konovalov had been instructed to deliver a crushing blow at the flank and rear of the central Red armies, and then proceed by forced marches into the depths of Russia, replenish their forces from the sections of the population hostile to the Soviets and press on to Moscow.

The Eighth Red Army succeeded in restoring the position on its left flank by bringing up its reserve. The right flank of the Ninth Army, however, was more seriously damaged. The commander of the main striking force, Shorin, succeeded in closing the gap between the two armies internally but could not check the advance of Mamontov's cavalry. Shorin ordered the reserve 56th Division to bar Mamontov's path. One of its battalions which was loaded on carts and sent ahead to Sampur Station, was smashed in a head-on clash by a flank detachment of the Mamontov corps. The same fate befell the cavalry brigade of the 36th Rifle Division which had been moved up to cover the Tambov-Balashov railway. Encountering the whole

mass of Mamontov's cavalry, the brigade was broken up in a short engagement.

On August 18th, Mamontov swept into Tambov. But this circumstance did not prevent the bulk of Shorin's striking force from launching its offensive, although nearly two whole infantry divisions had to be assigned to deal with Mamontov. At the same time an offensive was launched on the Ukrainian sector of the Southern Front.

The front which in the north and north-east had extended almost in a straight line from Stary Oskol to Balashov with a bulge in the direction of Tsaritsin began to level out. Under the weight of superior forces the Cossack regiments retreated southward, making frequent counter-attacks and delaying the enemy at every strong point. When they set foot on Cossack soil, they recovered the fighting ability that they had lost on leaving it. Desertion sharply diminished; reinforcements flowed in from the districts of the middle Don. The deeper Shorin's striking force penetrated into the region of the Don Cossack Army, the stronger and fiercer became the Cossacks' resistance. At village meetings the Cossacks of the rebel districts of the upper Don proclaimed general mobilization on their own initiative, held church services, then set out without delay for the front.

As it fought its way towards the Khoper and the Don, overcoming the bitter resistance of the Whites and moving further and further into territory where the local population was obviously hostile to the Red Army, Shorin's force gradually lost its initial forward impetus. Meanwhile, in the region of Kachalinskaya

and Kotluban Station the White command had already created a strong manoeuvrable group consisting of three Kuban corps and the Sixth Infantry Division for an attack on the Tenth Red Army, which had been developing its offensive with the greatest success.

XXI

In twelve months the Melekhov family had been reduced to half its number. Pantelei was right when he remarked one day that death had taken a fancy to the house. Hardly had they had time to bury Natalya when once more the scent of incense and cornflowers filled the Melekhovs' spacious best room. Some ten days after Grigory had returned to the front Darya drowned herself in the Don.

On Saturday, after returning from the fields she went with Dunya to bathe. Below the kitchen gardens they undressed and sat a long time on the soft, trampled grass. From early morning Darya had been out of spirits, complaining of headache and weakness, and several times she had surreptitiously wept. Before stepping into the water Dunya gathered her hair into a knot, tied it up in a three-cornered kerchief, and, glancing sidelong at Darya, said commiseratingly: "How thin you've got, Darya! All your sinews are showing."

"I'll soon get better. . . ."

"Has your headache gone?"

"Yes. Well, let's bathe, it's late already." Darya was the first to run into the water. She plunged in and, coming up, blowing the water out of her nose

and mouth, swam to the middle. The swift current caught her up and began to carry her away.

Admiringly watching Darya as she shot forward with great masculine sweeps, Dunya waded in up to her waist, washed, wetted her breast and her strong, sun-warmed, femininely rounded arms. The two daughters-in-law of the Obnizovs were watering cabbages in a neighbouring garden. They heard Dunya laughingly call to Darya:

"Swim back, Darya, or a sheatfish will carry you off!"

Darya turned back, swam a little way, then momentarily flung herself out of the water up to her waist, folded her arms behind her head, shouted: "Good-bye, women!" and went to the bottom like a stone.

Some fifteen minutes later Dunya, white-faced, dressed in only her underskirt, ran into the Melekhovs' house.

"Darya's drowned, Mamma!" She could hardly pant the words out.

Not till the following day did they recover Darya's body with fishing tackle. At dawn the oldest and most experienced fisherman in Tatarsky, Arkhip Peskovatskov, set the six ends of his tackle across the current below the spot where Darya had drowned, and later he went with Pantelei to check the lines. A crowd of children and women gathered on the bank, Dunya among them. When, hitching up the fourth line with his oar handle, Arkhip had gone some sixty feet from the bank, Dunya distinctly heard him say in an undertone: "This seems like it."

He began to draw in the tackle more carefully, pulling with obvious effort on the line which ran plumb into the depths. Then over by the right bank there was a glimmer of white, both the old men bent over the water, the boat scooped up water with its gunwales, and the muffled thump of a body hauled into the boat reached the ears of the silent crowd. A sudden shiver ran through them all. One of the women broke into a quiet sobbing. Christonya, who was standing a little way off, roughly shouted at the children: "Now, clear out of here!" Through her tears Dunya saw Arkhip stand up in the stern and row expertly and silently with one oar to the bank. The boat grounded on the fine chalky shingle with a jarring scrunch. Darya was lying with her legs tucked up lifelessly, her cheek against the wet bottom. Her white body was just beginning to turn blue, and deep holes, the marks of the hooks, were clearly visible in the flesh. On her lank, swarthy calf, just below the knee, by the linen garter which she must have forgotten to remove before bathing, a fresh pink scratch was bleeding a little. The point of a hook had furrowed her leg with a crooked, jagged line. Convulsively crumpling her apron, Dunya was the first to go up to Darya, covering her with a sack ripped down the seams. With methodical haste Pantelei rolled up his trousers and pulled the boat up the bank. A wagon drove up a minute or two later, and Darya was carried to the Melekhovs' house.

Mastering her fear and feeling of disgust, Dunya helped her mother to wash the cold body, which still

retained the iciness of the deep Don current. There was something unfamiliar and stern about Darya's slightly swollen face, the faded gleam of the eyes glazed by a day's immersion in water. Silver river sand sparkled in her hair, the moist threads of water-weed were vividly green against her cheeks, and in the outflung arms hanging helplessly from the bench was such terrible repose that, when Dunya glanced at them, she hurriedly fell back, amazed and horrified at the complete lack of resemblance between this dead woman and the jesting, laughing Darya who had been so much in love with life. For long afterwards, when she recalled the stony clamminess of Darya's breasts and belly, the springiness of the stiffened limbs, Dunya would shake convulsively and try her utmost to forget it all. She was afraid the dead woman would visit her in her sleep at night, and for a week she slept in Ilyinichna's bed and, before getting in, prayed to God, asking: "Lord, don't let me dream of her! Protect me, Lord!"

If it had not been for the Obnizov women, who had heard Darya shout: "Good-bye, women!" she would have been buried quietly and without fuss. But when he heard of this last shout, which clearly indicated that Darya had intended to take her own life, Father Vissarion resolutely declared that he would not bury the suicide. Pantelei was furious.

"What do you mean, you won't bury her? Was she not baptized, or what?"

"I can't bury suicides; the law won't allow it."

"Then how is she to be buried, in your opinion? Like a dog?"

"In my opinion, how and where you like, except in the cemetery, where honest Christians are buried."

"Now, have a little pity!" Pantelei tried persuasions. "We've never had such a disgrace in our family."

"I can't. I have great respect for you, Pantelei Prokofyevich, as an exemplary church attendant, but I can't. It will be reported to the archdeacon, and I shan't be able to avoid the consequences," the priest insisted stubbornly.

It was a disgrace. Pantelei tried every means of persuading the pig-headed priest, promised to pay more, and to pay in reliable tsarist rubles, offered a yearling lamb as a gift. But, seeing at last that arguments were of no avail, he resorted to threats:

"I shan't bury her outside the cemetery. She's not just a stray creature to me, she's my own daughter-in-law. Her husband fell in the struggle against the Reds and held officer's rank and she herself was awarded a St. George medal, and you talk nonsense like that to me! No, Father, it won't come off; you'll bury her just as I tell you. Let her lie in our best room for the time being, and I'll inform the district ataman about it at once. He'll talk to you!"

Pantelei went out of the priest's house without a word of farewell, and in his temper even slammed the door. But the threat was effective: half an hour later a messenger came from the priest to say that Father Vissarion would be arriving to say the prayers in a minute.

They buried Darya, as was right, in the cemetery, beside Pyotr. When they dug the grave, Pantelei took

a fancy to the spot for himself. As he worked with the spade he looked about him and reflected that he would not find a better place, nor was it worth while looking for one. Over Pyotr's grave a recently planted poplar was rustling its tender branches; the oncoming autumn had already painted the leaves of its crown the yellow, bitter hue of decay. Calves had trampled out a path through the broken fence and between the graves; the road to the windmill ran past the fence; the trees planted by the solicitous hands of the dead's kinsfolk—maples, poplars, acacias, and the wild-growing thorn—stood welcomingly green and fresh. Around them the bindweed twined exuberantly, late-flowering rape showed yellow, wild oats and full-grained quitch were in ear. The crosses stood wound from foot to head with friendly, blue convolvulus. The spot was certainly cheerful, and dry....

As the old man dug the grave, he threw down the spade from time to time and seated himself on the damp, clayey earth, to smoke, to think of death. But evidently the times had not yet arrived when old people could once more die quietly in their own homes and rest where their own fathers and grandfathers had found their last shelter....

After Darya was buried, life grew still quieter in the Melekhovs' house. They carted the grain, threshed it, and gathered a rich harvest from the melon plot. They expected news from Grigory, but nothing had been heard of him since his departure for the front. Ilyinichna said more than once: "The devil doesn't even send greetings to his children! His wife's dead, and now he has no need of any of us...." Then

Cossacks on active service began to return more and more often on visits to Tatarsky. The rumours spread that the Cossacks had been beaten on the Balashov Front and were retreating towards the Don, there to take refuge behind the watery defence line and to act on the defensive until winter. But as to what would happen in the winter, all the front-line men talked of that without any attempt at secrecy: "When the Don freezes over, the Reds will drive us right back to the sea."

Pantelei, zealously working at the threshing, did not seem to pay any particular attention to the rumours roving around the Don lands. But he could not remain indifferent to what was happening. He shouted even more frequently at Ilyinichna and Dunya, grew more and more irritable as he heard that the front was drawing nearer. He quite often set to work to make something for the farm; but the work had only to go at all wrong in his hands for him to throw it down in a fury, and, spitting and cursing, he would rush to the threshing-floor, to allow his indignation to cool. Dunya was more than once the witness of such explosions. One day he set to work to mend a yoke; the job did not go well, and for no reason whatever the furious old man snatched up an axe and chopped at the yoke until only splinters were left. The same thing occurred with a horse-collar he was mending. One evening by the fire he twisted a wax-end and set to work to sew up the burst padding of the collar. Perhaps the thread was rotten, or perhaps the old man was too fidgety, but the thread broke twice in succession. That was enough; swearing horribly, Pan-

telei jumped up, sent his stool flying, kicked it towards the stove, and, growling like a dog, tore at the leather padding of the collar with his teeth. Then he flung the collar to the floor and, hopping like a cock, started to jump on it. Hearing the noise, Ilyinichna, who had gone to rest early, jumped out of bed in a fright. But, seeing what was happening, she lost her temper and reproached him:

"Have you gone mad, damn you, in your old age? What's the collar done to you?"

Pantelei gazed at his wife with frenzied eyes and roared:

"Shut up, you this and that!" Snatching up a piece of the collar, he threw it at the old woman.

Choking with laughter, Dunya flew like a bullet out into the porch. But after raging for a while, the old man calmed down, asked his wife's forgiveness for the words he had used in his anger, and scratched the back of his head for a long time as he stared at the fragments of the unfortunate collar, thinking out what they might be useful for. Such attacks of frenzy were repeated more than once, but, instructed by bitter experience, Ilyinichna found a different way of intervening. The moment Pantelei began to belch out curses, and smash up some domestic article, the old woman humbly but loudly enough remarked: "Smash it up, Prokofyevich! Break it up! You and I will yet make money for more!" And she even attempted to assist in the destruction. Then Pantelei would cool down at once, stare for a minute with vacant eyes at his wife, rummage with trembling hands in his pockets, find his tobacco-pouch, and bewilderedly sit down

in some quiet corner to smoke, to soothe his jangled nerves, inwardly cursing his explosive nature and reckoning up the losses he had sustained by his action.

A three-months-old pig which made its way into the enclosure fell a victim to his elderly, unbridled anger. He broke its back with a stake, and five minutes later, after slaughtering the animal, as he was tearing off the bristles with a nail, he looked guiltily, wheedlingly at his frowning wife and said:

"You know that pig was nothing but trouble. He'd have died in any case. They always get the plague at this time of year, and now we shall at least eat him, otherwise he'd have been lost to us altogether. That's true, isn't it, old lady? Well, what are you looking like a thunder-cloud for? May he be triply damned, that pig! Now, if he'd been a proper pig, but he was only a gammon! It didn't need a stake to kill him, spitting at him would have done it! And what a one he was for poking his snout into places! He'd rooted up a good forty potato plants."

"If he'd spoilt all the potato plants in the garden it wouldn't have come to more than thirty all together!" Ilyinichna quietly corrected him.

"Maybe; but if there'd been forty he'd have spoilt all the forty. He was like that. And thank God we're saved from him, from the enemy!" Pantelei answered without thinking.

The children fretted after they had seen their father off. Occupied with the house, Ilyinichna could not give them sufficient attention and, left to their own devices, they played for hours on end somewhere in the orchard or the threshing-floor. Mishatka vanished

one day after dinner and came back only at sunset. When Ilyinichna asked where he had been, the boy said he had been playing with other boys down by the Don. But Polyushka at once gave him away:

"He's telling lies, Granny! He's been to see Aunt Aksinya."

"But how do you know?" Ilyinichna asked, unpleasantly surprised by the news.

"I saw him climb across the fence from their yard."

"Is that where you've been? Now, speak up, child; what are you going red for?"

Mishatka gazed straight into his grandmother's eyes and answered: "I was telling you wrong, Granny. It's true I haven't been down by the Don, I was with Aunt Aksinya."

"What did you go there for?"

"She called me in, so I went."

"Why did you tell me you'd been with the boys?"

Mishatka was dumb for a second, then he raised his eyes ingenuously and whispered: "I was afraid you'd be angry."

"Why should I be angry with you? No.... But what did she want you for? What did you do there?"

"Nothing. She saw me and shouted: 'Come here!' So I went up to her, and she took me into the house, and put me on a chair...."

"Well?" Ilyinichna asked impatiently, trying to conceal her growing agitation.

"... She gave me cold pancakes to eat, and then she gave me this." Mishatka pulled a piece of sugar out of his pocket, showed it proudly, and put it away in his pocket again.

"But what did she say to you? Did she ask you anything?"

"She said I was to go and visit her, because she was lonely all by herself, and she promised to give me a treat. . . . She said I wasn't to tell anyone I'd been with her. She said you'd be angry with me."

"Did she!" Ilyinichna uttered, panting with suppressed indignation. "Well, and did she ask you anything?"

"Yes."

"Then what did she ask? Now, tell me, darling; don't be afraid."

"She asked whether I missed my daddy. I said I did. And she asked when he would be coming back and what news there was of him, but I said I didn't know, and that he was fighting in the war. Then she took me on her knee and told me a fairy story." Mishatka's eyes glittered animatedly and he smiled. "It was a nice story! About someone called Vanya, and how swan-geese carried him on their wings, and about Baba Yaga the witch."

Ilyinichna pursed her lips as she listened to Mishatka's confession. At the end she said sternly:

"You're not to go there any more, Grandson. And don't take any presents from her; you'd better not or your grandfather will hear of it and give you a whipping. God grant Grandfather doesn't find out, for he'd flay the skin off you. Don't go again, dear child!"

But, despite the strict prohibition, two days later Mishatka visited the Astakhovs' house again. Ilyinichna found out about it when she saw Mishatka's shirt: the torn sleeve which she had not had time to mend in

the morning was darned perfectly, and a little new mother-of-pearl button showed white on the collar. Knowing Dunya had been busy with the threshing and could not find time during the day to mend the children's clothes, Ilyinichna reproachfully asked: "Visited the neighbours again?"

"Yes!" Mishatka said in his confusion, and at once added: "I won't do it again, Granny; only don't be cross with me."

Ilyinichna decided to have a talk with Aksinya and to tell her flatly that she was to leave Mishatka in peace and not to wheedle herself into his favour either with presents or by telling stories. "She's driven Natalya off this earth, and now the devil's trying to worm her way into the children's good books, so as to entangle Grigory through them. What a snake! Aiming at being my daughter-in-law with her own husband still alive! Only nothing will come of it. And besides, would Grigory ever take her after such trouble?" the old woman thought.

Her penetrating and jealous, motherly eyes had not overlooked the circumstance that when Grigory was at home he had avoided meeting Aksinya. She realized that he had done so not out of fear of people's reproaches, but because he regarded Aksinya as guilty of his wife's death. Secretly Ilyinichna hoped that Natalya's death would part Grigory from Aksinya for ever, and that she would never become one of the Melekhov family.

The same evening Ilyinichna saw Aksinya at the landing-stage by the Don and called to her:

"Here, come over to me for a minute; I want to talk to you..."

Setting down her bucket, Aksinya calmly walked across and greeted Ilyinichna.

"Now listen to me, my dear," Ilyinichna began, scanning her neighbour's beautiful but hated face. "Why are you trying to take other folk's children away? Why are you calling the boy to you and making up to him? Who asked you to sew up his shirt for him and give him presents? What's in your mind—that there's no one to care for him, now his mother's gone? That we can't manage without you? Haven't you got any conscience, you with your shameless eyes?"

"But what harm have I done? What are you annoyed about, Grandmother?" Aksinya asked, flaring up.

"What do you mean: what harm have you done? Have you any right to touch Natalya's child, when you yourself sent her to her grave?"

"How can you say such a thing, Grandmother? Come to your senses! Who sent her to her grave? She laid hands on herself."

"And not because of you?"

"I know nothing about that."

"But I do!" Ilyinichna cried excitedly.

"Don't shout, old woman; I'm not your daughter-in-law, for you to shout at me. I've got a husband to do that."

"I can see right through you! I see even what you're hoping for! You're not my daughter-in-law, but you'd

like to be! First you want to win over the children, then you'll make up to Grisha. Isn't that it?"

"I've got no intention of becoming your daughter-in-law. Are you going mad, old woman? I've got a husband still alive."

"That's just it, that you're trying to get away from a living husband and fasten yourself on to another!"

Aksinya turned noticeably pale and said:

"I don't know what you're setting about me and abusing me for. I've never fastened myself on to anyone and never intend to, and as for being kind to your grandson—what harm is there in that? You know full well I've got no children of my own, I'm glad to see others' children, and so I called him. As for giving him presents, I gave him a lump of sugar, if that's what you call presents! And why should I give him presents anyway? You're gabbling God knows what!"

"You never called him into your house when his mother was alive. But as soon as Natalya's dead you suddenly grow good-natured."

"He used to visit me even when Natalya was alive!" Aksinya said with the least trace of a smile.

"Don't tell lies, you shameless hussy!"

"You ask him, and then call me liar if you like!"

"Well, I don't care how it was; don't you dare to call him into your place any more. And don't take it into your head that you're going to find favour in Grigory's eyes that way. You'll never be his wife, know that!"

Her face distorted with anger, Aksinya said hoarsely:

"Hold your tongue! He won't ask you! And don't poke your nose into other people's affairs!"

Ilyinichna was about to make some further retort, but Aksinya silently turned away, went to her buckets, heaved the yoke onto her shoulders, and, splashing water as she went, swiftly strode up the path.

From that time on, if she met any of the Melekhovs she said not a word of greeting to them, but walked past with satanic pride, dilating her nostrils. But whenever she happened to see Mishatka alone, she timidly looked about her and, if there was no one near, ran up to him, bent down, and pressed him to her breast. Laughing and crying, kissing his sunburnt brow and sullen, black little Melekhov eyes, she whispered disconnectedly: "My dear little Grigoryevich! My darling! How I've been longing for you! Your Aunt Aksinya's a fool. . . . Ah, what a fool!" And for long afterwards a tremulous smile hovered on her lips, and her moistened eyes shone with happiness as brightly as those of a young girl.

At the end of August, Pantelei was mobilized. With him all the Cossacks capable of bearing arms in Tatarsky also went off to the front. Only war-wounded, youngsters, and the decrepit old men were left of the male population in the village. The mobilization affected everybody down to the last man, and only the obviously maimed were exempted by the medical commissions.

When Pantelei received the order from the village ataman to present himself at the mustering point, he hurriedly said good-bye to his old woman, his grandchildren, and Dunya and, groaning, went down on his

knees. He bowed his head twice to the ground and, crossing himself before the icons, said:

"Good-bye, my dears. It looks as though it won't be granted to us to see each other again; the last hour has come. My command to you is: thresh the grain both day and night, try to get it finished before the rains set in. If need be, hire a man to help you. If I don't come back by autumn, carry on without me; plough up the autumn fields as much as you've got strength for, and sow rye, at least a couple of acres of it. Keep your wits about you, old woman, and carry on the work properly, don't let your hands be idle! Whether Grigory and I return or whether we don't, you'll need grain most of all. War is war, but it's a miserable life without bread, too. Well, God preserve you!"

Ilyinichna accompanied her husband to the square, watched for the last time as he limped along at Christonya's side, hurrying after the wagon, then wiped her swollen eyes with her apron and made her way home without one look back. A heap of half-threshed wheat was awaiting her on the threshing-floor, milk was standing in the stove, the children had not had any food since morning, so the old woman had a great many things to attend to. And she hurried home without stopping, silently bowing to the few women she passed, not entering into talk and only nodding assent when one of her acquaintances asked her commiseratively: "Seen your soldier off, then?"

Several days later Ilyinichna milked the cows at dawn, then drove them out into the lane and was about to return to the yard, when a muffled, oppres-

sive thunder reached her ears. She looked around, but could not see a single cloud in the sky. A little later the thunder was repeated.

"Do you hear that music, old woman?" the old cowherd rounding up the cows asked her.

"What music?"

"Why, all that music on the low notes."

"I can hear it all right, but I don't rightly know what it can be."

"You'll know soon enough. When it hits the village from out yonder, you'll know at once! That's gun-fire. They're shaking the guts out of our old men. . . ."

Ilyinichna crossed herself and silently went through the wicket-gate.

The gun-fire sounded incessantly for four days. It was especially loud at dawn and dusk. But when a north-easterly wind blew, the thunder of the distant battles could be heard in the middle of the day also. On the threshing-floors the work would come to a halt for a moment, the women would cross themselves and sigh deeply, recalling their dear ones and whispering prayers. Then the stone rollers would rumble again on the threshing-floors, the boy-drivers would urge on the horses and bullocks, and the day of toil would assume its indefeasible rights. The end of August was amazingly fine and dry. The wind carried the chaff dust through the village, a sweet scent of threshed rye straw hung everywhere, and though the sun still burned mercilessly, the approach of autumn made itself felt in everything. The faded, dove-grey wormwood showed dimly white over the pasturage, the

crowns of the poplars beyond the Don turned yellow, the scent of the autumn apples in the orchards grew keener, the distant horizons became autumnally clear, and the first flocks of migrating cranes were seen in the harvested fields.

Baggage trains carrying military stores to the Don crossings rolled along the Hetman's highway from west to east; refugees arrived in the Don-side villages. They said that the Cossacks were making a fighting retreat; some of them declared that this retreat was being carried out deliberately, in order to lure on the Reds, with the intention of surrounding and annihilating them. Some of the Tatarsky people began quietly to make ready for flight. They fed up their bullocks and horses, and at night buried grain and chests filled with their most precious possessions in pits. The gun-fire, which had died away, was renewed on September 5 with greater intensity and now sounded distinct and menacing. The fighting was going on some forty versts beyond the Don, north-east of Tatarsky. A day later, gun-fire was heard upstream, in the west also. The front was steadily drawing nearer the river.

Hearing that the majority of the villagers were preparing to leave, Ilyinichna suggested to Dunya that they also should go. She felt bewildered and perplexed, and did not know what to do about the farm, the house—whether they should abandon it all and drive off with the others or should remain at home. Before his departure for the front Pantelei had talked about the threshing, about ploughing, about the cattle; but he had not said one word indicating what they were to do if the front came near Tatarsky. In the end

Ilyinichna decided to send off Dunya and the children together with their most valuable possessions with one of the villagers, and to remain behind herself, even if the Reds occupied the village.

During the night of September 17 Pantelei unexpectedly arrived home. He had come on foot from somewhere near the Kazanskaya district centre and was worn out and ill-tempered. After resting for half an hour, he sat down at the table and began to eat as Ilyinichna had never seen him eat before in all their life together. He threw a good half-bucketful of thin cabbage soup down his throat, then fell upon some millet porridge. Ilyinichna clapped her hands in astonishment.

"Lord, the way you're eating, Prokofyevich! I'd say you'd had nothing to eat for three days!"

"Well, and do you think I have, you old fool? For three days I've not had as much as a dew drop in my mouth."

"Why, don't they feed you in the army, then?"

"May the devils feed them like it!" Pantelei answered, purring like a cat, his mouth crammed to the lips. "Whatever you can get hold of, you guzzle; but I haven't learned to steal yet. That's all very well for the youngsters, they've got no conscience left. This accursed war has made them so used to filching that I was shocked to see it; but at last I got over it. They grab everything they see and drag it off. . . . It's not war, but a scourge of God!"

"You'd better not eat so much all at once. Something might happen to you. Look how you've swollen up, just like a spider."

"Hold your tongue! Bring me some milk, the biggest jug you've got."

Ilyinichna burst into tears as she watched her famished husband.

"Are you back for good?" she asked when at length he leaned back from his plate.

"We'll see," he answered evasively.

"I suppose they've let you old men go home?"

"They haven't let anybody go home. How can they, when the Reds are pushing towards the Don? I just cleared out."

"But won't you have to answer for it?" Ilyinichna asked fearfully.

"If they catch me I may have to."

"Why, are you going to hide yourself, then?"

"And were you thinking I'd go visiting friends or go for a song-and-dance in the square? Pah, you stupid blockhead!" Pantelei spat in his annoyance; but the old woman did not stop her pestering: "Oh dear, oh dear! As if we hadn't enough sorrow, now they'll arrest you. . . ."

"Well, and it may be better to sit in prison than go dragging over the steppe with a rifle," Pantelei said wearily. "I'm no youngster to go marching forty versts a day, to dig trenches, to attack at the double, and to crawl along the ground, ducking the bullets. The devil himself couldn't do it! A bullet caught a comrade of mine from Krivaya Rechka right under the left shoulder-blade, and he didn't even kick once. There's not much pleasure in such things!"

The old man carried his rifle and cartridge-pouch outside and hid them in the chaff-shed. But when

Ilyinichna asked where his coat was, he answered moodily and reluctantly:

"I've worn it out, or, to be more exact, I threw it away. Beyond Shumilinsk they pressed us so hard that everybody dropped everything and ran like mad. There was no time to worry about coats then. . . . Some men had sheepskins, and they even threw them away. And what the devil are you thinking about that coat for? Now, if it had been a good one—but it wasn't fit for a beggar."

In reality the coat had been a good new one, but anything the old man had had to abandon was always no good at all, so he said. It was the way he had of consoling himself. Ilyinichna knew that, and so she did not bother to argue about the quality of the coat.

In a family council that night they decided that Ilyinichna and Pantelei would remain at home with the children until the last moment, to look after their possessions and to bury the grain that had been threshed, while Dunya would drive off with the yoke of old bullocks and the family chests to relations in the village of Latyshevo, on the Chir.

This plan was not destined to be carried out in its entirety. They saw Dunya off next morning, but at noon a punitive detachment of Kalmyk Cossacks rode into Tatarsky. One of the Tatarsky villagers must have seen Pantelei making his way home, for an hour after their arrival the Kalmyks galloped up to the Melekhov yard. Catching sight of the horsemen, Pantelei scrambled up into the loft with extraordinary speed and agility. Ilyinichna went out to meet the guests.

"Where your old man?" an elderly, well-built Kalmyk with sergeant-major's stripes asked, dismounting and pushing past Ilyinichna through the wicket-gate.

"At the front. Where else should he be?" Ilyinichna answered roughly.

"Lead us into house; we search it."

"What for?"

"To look for old man. Ah, shame on you! An old woman like you, and telling lies!" A youthful-looking sergeant shook his head reproachfully and bared his white, close-set teeth.

"Don't you grin like that, you unwashed heathen! I said he's not here, and that means he's not here!"

"No more of talk, lead us into house. If not, we go ourselves," the offended Kalmyk said sternly. He resolutely strode towards the porch, setting his out-turned feet wide apart.

They carefully searched the rooms, talked among themselves in Kalmyk, then two of them went off to look in the backyard, while one, short and swarthy, almost black, with a pock-marked face and snub nose, pulled up his broad striped *sharovari* and went into the porch. Through the wide-open door Ilyinichna saw the Kalmyk jump, grip the cross-beam with his hands, and dextrously draw himself up. Five minutes later he nimbly jumped down again, and behind him, groaning, smothered with clay, a spider's web entangled in his beard, Pantelei carefully clambered down. Looking at the old woman, who was standing with lips tightly pressed together, he said:

"So they've found me, damn them! Someone must have told them. . . ."

He was taken under escort to the district centre of Karginskaya, where the field courts martial were being held. Ilyinichna wept a little and, listening to the renewed gun-fire and the clearly audible chatter of machine-guns beyond the Don, went into the granary to hide at least a little of the grain.

XXII

Fourteen captured deserters were awaiting trial. The trial was brief and merciless. The elderly captain who was president of the court asked the accused his name, his regiment, and found out how long he had been a deserter. Then he exchanged a few words in an undertone with the other members—a lieutenant who had lost one arm, and a bearded and puffy-faced sergeant grown fat from easy living—and announced the sentence. The majority of the deserters were sentenced to corporal punishment with the birch, the sentence being carried out by Kalmyks in an uninhabited house set apart specially for this purpose. Desertion had grown too extensive in the warlike Don army to allow of open and public birching, as in 1918.

Pantelei was the sixth to be called before the court. Agitated and pale, he stood in front of the judges' table, his hands down his trouser seams.

"Your surname?" the captain asked, not looking at the accused.

"Melekhov, Your Excellency."

"Your Christian name, and patronymic?"

"Pantelei Prokofyevich, Your Excellency."

The captain raised his eyes from his papers and looked fixedly at the old man.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"From Tatarsky village in Vyeshenskaya District, Your Excellency."

"You're not the father of Squadron Commander Grigory Melekhov, are you?"

"Yes, Your Excellency." Pantelei at once recovered his spirits, feeling that the birch was, so to speak, drawing farther away from his aged body.

"Look here, aren't you ashamed of yourself?" the captain asked, not shifting his prickly eyes from Pantelei's sunken face.

At that the old man, breaking all the regulations, laid his left hand on his chest and said in a weeping tone:

"Your Excellency! Captain! Make me say prayers to God for you the rest of my life! Don't sentence me to be whipped. I had two married sons. The elder one was killed by the Reds. . . . I've grandchildren, and is it necessary to whip a broken-down old man like me?"

"We have to teach old as well as young how to serve. Did you think you'd be awarded crosses for running away from the forces?" the one-armed lieutenant interrupted him. The corners of his mouth twitched nervously.

"What do I want a cross for. . . ? Send me to my regiment and I shall serve in faith and truth. . . . I don't know myself how I came to run away; the devil's spirit must have taken hold of me." Pantelei went muttering on about the unthreshed grain, about his

lameness, about the neglected farm. But with a gesture the captain reduced him to silence, then bent over to the lieutenant and whispered into his ear. The lieutenant nodded, and the captain turned to Pantelei:

"Good! Have you said all you want to say? I know your son, and I am astonished that he has got such a father. When did you desert from the forces? A week ago? Well, and do you want the Reds to occupy your village and to flay the skin off you? Is that the sort of example you show the young Cossacks? By law we ought to condemn you and sentence you to corporal punishment; but out of respect for your son's rank as an officer I spare you that disgrace. Were you a non-commissioned officer?"

"Yes, Your Excellency."

"What rank?"

"I was a corporal, Your Excellency."

"Reduced to the ranks!" The captain raised his voice and roughly ordered: "Report to your regiment at once! Inform your squadron commander that by decision of the field court martial you are deprived of the rank of corporal. Did you have any rewards for this or previous wars...? Off with you!"

Beside himself with joy, Pantelei went out, crossed himself before the church, and made a bee-line for home across the hills: "Well, I'll hide myself a lot better this time! It'll take devils themselves to find me; they can send three squadrons of Kalmyks to look for me!" he thought as he limped across the stubble-field, overgrown with meadow grass.

Out in the steppe he decided that it would be better to go along the road, in order not to attract the atten-

tion of people riding by. "They'd be bound to think I was a deserter. I might run into soldiers, and they'd lay on the whip without trying me first," he deliberated aloud, turning off the ploughed lands on to a neglected summer track overgrown with plantain; for some reason he no longer thought of himself as a deserter.

The closer he drew to the Don, the more frequently he fell in with refugees' wagons. The scenes which had occurred in the spring retreat were being repeated. Wagons and britzkas loaded with household belongings, and droves of bellowing cattle, like cavalry on the march, stretched in all directions over the steppe; flocks of sheep raised clouds of dust. The creaking of wheels, the neighing of horses, human shouts, the trample of innumerable hoofs, the bleating of sheep, children's weeping filled the tranquil expanses of the steppe with incessant and disturbing noise.

"Where are you off to, Grandad? Go back, the Reds are right behind us!" a Cossack with bandaged head shouted from a passing wagon.

"Go on with you! Where are the Reds?" Pantelei halted in consternation.

"The other side of the Don. They're getting near Vyeshenskaya. Are you going over to them?"

Reassured on hearing that the river was between him and the Reds, Pantelei continued his journey and towards evening drew near to Tatarsky. As he dropped down from the hill he kept his eyes about him. He was amazed to find the village looking so deserted. Not a soul was to be seen in the streets. The houses were shuttered and silent. Neither human voices were to be heard, nor the lowing of cattle; but down by

the river itself there was some activity. As he drew nearer, Pantelei had no difficulty in recognizing the figures as armed Cossacks hauling up barges and carrying them into the village. He guessed that Tatarsky had been completely abandoned by its inhabitants. Cautiously turning into his side lane, Pantelei strode towards the house. Ilyinichna and the grandchildren were sitting in the kitchen.

"Why, here's Grandad!" Mishatka cried out in delight, flinging his arms around the old man's neck.

Ilyinichna burst into tears of joy and said:

"I never hoped to see you again! Well, Prokofyevich, it's as you wish, but I'm not willing to stay here any longer. Let everything be burned to the ground, but I'm not going to watch over an empty house. Almost everybody else has left the village; but here am I sitting with the children like a fool. Harness up the mare at once, and let's ride off wherever we can. Have they let you go?"

"Yes."

"For good?"

"For good, so long as they don't catch me!"

"Well, you can't hide here. This morning, when the Reds were firing from the opposite bank, it was terrible. I took the children down into the cellar so long as it went on. But now they've been driven off. Some Cossacks came and asked for milk and advised us to clear out of here."

"Cossacks? Not our villagers by any chance?" Pantelei asked with interest, closely examining a fresh bullet-hole in the window-frame.

"No, they're strangers; from the Khoper, I think."

"Then we've got to go," Pantelei said with a sigh.

Late in the afternoon he dug a hole under the dung-fuel heap, rolled seven sacks of wheat into it, carefully filled it up, and piled dung-fuel bricks over it. As soon as dusk fell he harnessed the mare into the wagonette, put two sheepskin coats, a sack of flour, millet, and a bound sheep in it, tied both cows to the back, and, seating Ilyinichna and the children on the sacks, said:

"Well, and now God be with us!" He drove out of the yard, handed the reins to his old wife, closed the gates, and as far as the hills strode along beside the wagonette, sniffing and wiping the tears away with his coat sleeve.

XXIII

On September 17, advanced units of the 9th Red Army under the Red commander Shorin, after a route march of thirty versts, reached the bank of the Don. On the morning of the 18th, Red batteries opened up all along the line from the mouth of the Medveditsa to the Kazanskaya District. After brief artillery bombardment the infantry captured the left-bank villages and district centres of Bukanovskaya, Yelanskaya, and Vyeshenskaya, and by the end of the day more than a hundred and fifty versts of the left bank had been cleared of Whites. The Cossack squadrons withdrew in good order to positions that had been prepared beforehand. All the available means of crossing the river were in their hands but the bridge at Vyeshenskaya was nearly captured by the Reds. Well in

advance, the Cossacks had piled straw round it and soaked the planks in kerosene in order to set fire to it when they retreated, and they were just about to do so when a messenger galloped up with the news that one of the squadrons of the 37th Regiment was retreating from the village of Perevoznny to the bridge at Vyeshenskaya. The lagging squadron galloped madly up to the bridge just as the Red infantry were entering the place. In spite of the machine-gun fire the Cossacks managed to cross the bridge and set fire to it after them, losing more than ten men in killed and wounded, and a similar number of horses.

Until the end of September the regiments of the 22nd and 23rd divisions of the 9th Red Army held the villages they had captured on the left bank of the Don. The opposing forces were divided by a river whose width in those days did not exceed two hundred yards, and in places was not more than seventy. The Reds made no vigorous attempts to affect a crossing; here and there they tried at the fords but were driven back. For two weeks there was active artillery and small-arms fire along the whole sector of the front. The Cossacks held the dominating heights and could shell enemy troop concentrations on the approaches to the Don, preventing them from moving up to the bank during the day-time; but since the Cossack squadrons on this sector consisted of the poorest troops (old men and youths between seventeen and nineteen) they themselves made no attempt either to cross the Don and push the Reds back in an offensive on the left bank.

Ever since their retreat to the right bank on the first

day the Cossacks had been expecting to see the villages held by the Reds go up in flames, but to their great surprise not a single puff of smoke appeared on the left bank, and what was more, the villagers who came over to them at night reported that the Red Army men were seizing no property and paying generously for the food they took, even water-melons, in Soviet currency. This gave rise to great bewilderment and indignant astonishment among the Cossacks. To them it seemed that after the uprising the Reds ought to raze all the insurgent villages and district centres to the ground; they had expected those of the population who had remained behind, the male half at any rate, to be ruthlessly wiped out, but here was reliable information that the Reds had not touched a single peaceful inhabitant and everything indicated that they had no intention of taking revenge.

On the night of the 19th, the Khoper Cossacks stationed opposite Vyeshenskaya decided to investigate this strange conduct on the part of the enemy. A trumpet-voiced Cossack cupped his hands round his mouth and shouted:

"Hey you, red-bellies! Why aren't you burning our houses? Haven't you got any matches? Swim over here, we'll give you some!"

A stentorian voice answered him from the darkness: "We didn't catch you at home or we'd have burned you and the houses together!"

"Got poor, have you? Nothing to light a fire with?" the Cossack shouted back lustily.

And the calm, cheerful answer came back: "Come over here, you White bastard, and we'll give you some

hot cinders in your pants that'll keep you scratching for the rest of your life!"

The outposts flung curses and jibes back and forth at each other, then fired a few rounds and fell silent.

Early in October the main forces of the Don Army, consisting of two army corps concentrated in the Kazanskaya-Pavlovsk sector, went over to the offensive. The 3rd Don Army Corps, numbering 8,000 bayonets and over 6,000 sabres, forced the Don not far from Pavlovsk, drove back the 56th Red Army Division and began a successful advance eastward. Soon afterwards General Konovalov's 2nd Army Corps also crossed the Don. Consisting largely of cavalry, it was able to penetrate deep into the enemy's positions and deliver a number of smashing blows. The 21st Red Infantry Division, which till then had been held in reserve, was brought into action and succeeded in holding up the advance of the 3rd Don Army Corps for a short time, but under the united pressure of both army corps was forced to retreat. In a bitter engagement on October 14, the 2nd Army Corps practically annihilated the 14th Red Infantry Division. In a week the Reds were driven out of the left bank area all the way up to Vyeshenskaya. With this wide bridge-head in their possession the two Don Army corps continued to force the 9th Red Army to retreat.

Almost at the same time as General Konovalov's 2nd Army Corps, yet another force, the 1st Don Army Corps, located in the Kletskaya District, crossed the Don.

The left-flank divisions of the 9th Red Army were now threatened with encirclement, and the commander

of the South-East Front ordered a further retreat to a line extending from the mouth of the river Ikorets to Kumylzhenskaya. But the Ninth Army was unable to hold this line either. Numerous Cossack squadrons formed haphazardly in the general mobilization crossed over from the right bank of the Don and, joining up with the regular units of the 2nd Don Army Corps, continued to drive the Red forces northward. By October 29, the Whites had captured Filonovo and Porovino stations and the town of Novokhopersk. And yet, great though the Don Army's successes were in October, the Cossacks no longer possessed the confidence that had buoyed them up in the spring, during their victorious advance towards the northern boundaries of the province. Most of the front-line men realized that this was only temporary success and that they would not manage to hold out longer than the winter.

The situation on the Southern Front soon changed abruptly. The defeat of the Volunteer Army in a general engagement on the Orel-Kromy Front and the brilliant operations of Budyonny's cavalry on the Voronezh sector decided the outcome of the struggle. In November the Volunteer Army fell back southward, exposing the left flank of the Don Army and drawing it, too, into the retreat.

XXIV

For two and a half weeks Pantelei lived safely with his family in the little village of Latyshevo. But as soon as he heard that the Reds had fallen back from the Don, he made ready to drive home.

Some five versts outside Tatarsky he climbed down with a resolute air from his wagonette and said:

"I can't stand any more of this foot-pace! And with those damned cows you can't go at a trot! What the devil did we drive them with us for? Dunya, halt your bullocks! Tie the cows to your wagon, and I'll trot off home. Maybe there's only ashes left of our house."

Spurred on by the greatest impatience, he transferred the children from his wagonette to Dunya's big wagon, put all the surplus load into it as well, and, with a lighter wagonette, rattled over the bumpy road at a trot. The first verst put the mare in a muck sweat; never had her master treated her so mercilessly. He whipped her on incessantly, never letting the knout out of his hands.

"You'll drive the mare to death! What are you galloping along like a madman for?" cried Ilyinichna, clinging to the ribs of the wagonette, painfully knitting her brows as she was violently jolted about.

"In any case she won't come to my grave to weep.... Now! You devil! Sweating, eh? I'll make you sweat! Maybe there's only stumps left of our home ..." Pantelei said through clenched teeth.

His fears proved unfounded: the house was still standing. But almost all its windows were broken, the door had been torn from its hinges, the walls were pitted with bullets. Everything in the yard had a look of neglect and desolation. One corner of the stable had been sliced off by a shell; a second shell had dug a shallow crater close to the wall, smashing the frame and breaking the well-crane in two. The

war from which Pantelei had fled had itself come to his home, leaving behind it its hideous traces of destruction. But still greater damage had been done to the farm by the Khoper Cossacks who had been quartered in Tatarsky. In the cattle-yard they had thrown down the fences and had dug trenches to the depth of a man's height. To avoid extra work they had taken one of the barn walls to pieces and had used the beams for shoring up their trenches; they had thrown stones off the stone wall to make a loop-hole for a machine-gun; they had got rid of half a stack of hay, recklessly feeding it to their horses; they had set fire to the wattle fences and ruined the outdoor kitchen stove.

When he had looked over the house and outbuildings Pantelei clutched his head. This time his usual habit of depreciating his losses forsook him. Damn it, he couldn't say that all he had lost had cost him nothing and was good only for straw! A granary was not a coat, and it had cost no small sum to build.

"It's just as though there had never been a barn," Ilyinichna said with a sigh.

"It wasn't much of a . . ." Pantelei said quickly. But he did not finish his sentence; he waved his hand and went into the threshing-floor.

The pock-marked walls of the house, scarred with bullets and fragments of shell, looked forbiddingly neglected. The wind was whistling through the rooms, dust lay thickly on the tables and benches. It would take much time to put everything in order again.

The very next day Pantelei rode on horseback to Vyeshenskaya and after some trouble wheedled out

of his medical friend a document certifying that owing to his leg trouble the Cossack Pantelei Prokofyevich Melekhov was incapable of walking and needed a course of treatment. This certificate saved the old man from being sent back to the front. He presented it to the ataman, and whenever he went to the village administration, to make his case look more convincing, he leaned heavily on his stick, limping on each leg in turn.

Never before had life in Tatarsky involved so much bustle and disorder as after that return from the retreat. People went from yard to yard identifying their possessions, which had been scattered about by the Khoper Cossacks. They wandered over the steppe and through the ravines in search of stray cows. The very first day Tatarsky came under artillery fire, a flock of three hundred sheep had vanished altogether from the upper end of the village. According to the shepherd, one of the shells had burst just in front of the grazing flock, and the sheep, waving their thick tails, had torn off into the steppe in terror and had vanished. They were found some forty versts away, a week after the inhabitants had returned to their deserted village. But when they were driven back and sorted out, half the flock turned out to be strange sheep, with an unknown clip in their ears, while more than fifty of the Tatarsky sheep were still missing. A sewing-machine belonging to the Bogatiryovs was found in the Melekhovs' garden, while Pantelei discovered the sheet-iron roof of his barn on Anikushka's threshing-floor. The same sort of thing had happened in all the neighbouring villages. And for a long time the inhabitants of near

and far villages of the Don-side area came visiting Tatarsky, and for a long time afterwards questions were asked: "You haven't seen a cow, have you, a red one, with a bald patch on her forehead, her left horn broken short?" "A yearling bull, a dun, it didn't happen to wander into your village, by any chance?"

Without doubt more than one yearling bull had been boiled in the Cossack squadron's cauldrons and field-kitchens. But spurred on by hope, the owners went striding across the steppe until they were convinced that they would never find all they had lost.

Now he was released from service, Pantelei energetically put the outbuildings and the fencing in order. Stacks of grain still unthreshed were piled on the threshing-floor, the gluttonous mice went burrowing through them, but the old man did not set his hand to the threshing. How could he, when the farm stood unfenced, there was no sign of a barn, and everything on the farm bore the shameful stigma of disorder? In addition, good weather set in with the autumn, and there was no need to hurry with the threshing.

Dunya and Ilyinichna replastered and whitewashed the house and helped Pantelei to put up a makeshift fence and do other jobs. Somehow or other they got hold of glass, reglazed the windows, and cleaned up the summer kitchen and the well. The old man himself went down the well and evidently caught a cold down there, for he went coughing and sneezing with his shirt wet with sweat for a week. But he had only to drink a couple of bottles of home-made vodka at one sitting, then to lie awhile on the hot stove for his malady to vanish as though by magic.

There was still no news from Grigory, and only at the end of October did Pantelei learn by chance that he was quite well and with his regiment somewhere in Voronezh Province. He gleaned this information from a wounded Cossack of Grigory's regiment who passed through the village. The old man cheered up mightily, and in his joy drank his last bottle of medicinal vodka distilled with red pepper. Afterwards he was talkative all day and as proud as a young cock. He halted every passer-by to tell them:

"Have you heard the news? Our Grigory captured Voronezh. We've had a rumour that he's been raised in rank and is now commanding a division again, or possibly an army corps. You'd go a long way to find a soldier like him! You know yourself..." So the old man spun his yarns, feeling an invincible necessity to share his joy, to brag.

"Your son's a hero," the villagers told him.

Pantelei winked happily.

"And how could he help being a hero when you know whose son he is? When I was young I, too—I say it without boasting—I was no worse than him! My leg prevents me or I wouldn't let him better me even now! Not a division maybe, but I'd know how to handle a squadron. If there were more of us old men at the front we'd have taken Moscow long ago. But now we're marking time, can't manage those peasants anyhow..."

The last person to whom Pantelei happened to talk that day was old Beskhlebnov. He came past the Melkhovs' yard, and Pantelei did not fail to stop him with: "Hey, wait a bit, Filip Agevich! How are you

getting on? Come in for a minute and let's have a chat."

Beskhlebnov came up and greeted Pantelei.

"Have you heard of my Grisha's doings?" Pantelei asked.

"Why, what's he been up to?"

"They've put him in command of a division. That's the monster he's in charge of now!"

"A division?"

"Yes, a division."

"You don't say so!"

"But I do! They wouldn't put just anyone in command of it, would they now?"

"Of course not."

Pantelei exultantly stared at his companion and continued the conversation so dear to his heart:

"I've got a son who's the astonishment of everybody! A chestful of crosses—what do you say to that? And the times he's been wounded and had shell shock! Any other man would have given up the ghost long ago, but it's nothing to him, it's like water on a duck's back. No, real Cossacks haven't yet died out altogether in the Don lands."

"You're right, there, but somehow we don't seem to get much benefit from them," old Beskhlebnov, who had never been much of a talker, repeated thoughtfully.

"How do you make that out? Look how far they've driven the Reds, right beyond Voronezh now, and they're getting near to Moscow."

"They've been getting near it for a very long time. . . ."

"It can't be done in a hurry, Filip Agevich. You've got to realize that in war nothing is ever done in a hurry. Hurried work is botched work. You've got to do everything little by little, according to the maps, according to the plans . . . according to all sorts of things. Peasants in Russia are as plentiful as grasshoppers, and how many of us Cossacks are there? A mere handful!"

"That's all true, but it looks as though our men won't be able to hold out for long. We must expect guests again by winter, so people are saying."

"If they don't take Moscow quickly now, then the Reds will be back here again. You're right so far as that goes."

"But do you think they'll take Moscow?"

"They ought to; but it's as God wills. Surely our men can manage it. The Cossacks have been drafted to the last man, all twelve Cossack corps. Can't they manage it?"

"The devil knows! And how about you—done with fighting now?"

"A fine foot-slogger I'd make! But if it wasn't for this trouble with my leg I'd show them how to fight the enemy! We old men are a sturdy lot!"

"They say the sturdy old men ran so hard from the Reds on the other side of the Don that not one of them was left with a sheepskin. They stripped themselves of everything down to their skin and threw it all away. They say all the steppe was yellow with sheepskins, and it looked like a carpet of flowers."

Pantelei gave Beskhlebnov a sidelong glance and said dryly:

"In my view that's all lies! Maybe some of them did throw off their clothing to make things light, but why should people go and make it out a hundred times worse than it is? A great matter—a coat, or even a sheepskin! Life is more precious than that—or isn't it, I ask? And besides, it isn't every old man that can run well in his clothes. In this accursed war you need to have legs like those of a borzoi bitch. And take me, for instance: where am I to get legs like that? And why are you so upset about it, Filip Agevich? God forgive me, but what the devil is the use of them—the sheepskins, I mean—to you? It isn't a question of sheepskins, or even coats, but of giving the enemy a really good hiding. That's so, isn't it? Well, good-day to you, we've got talking, and there's work waiting for me. Did you find your calf, by the way? Still looking for it? And no news? Well, I expect the Khoper men ate it; may it choke them! But don't you worry about the war: our men will get the better of the peasants!" And Pantelei limped with an important air towards the steps.

But evidently it was not so easy to "get the better of the peasants." The last Cossack offensive had not been achieved without losses. Only an hour later Pantelei's cheerful mood was clouded by unhappy news. As he was fashioning a beam for the well-frame he heard a woman crying and lamenting for the dead. The sounds came closer. Pantelei sent Dunya to investigate.

"Run and find out who's died," he said, setting his axe into the chopping block.

Dunya quickly returned with the news that three

dead Cossacks had been brought home from the Upper Don Front: Anikushka, Christonya, and another, a seventeen-year-old youngster from the far end of the village. Dumbfounded by the news, Pantelei took off his cap and crossed himself.

"May the Lord take them to His kingdom! What a fine Cossack he was!" he said mournfully, thinking of Christonya and recalling how recently he and Christonya had set off together from Tatarsky to go to the mustering point.

He could work no longer. Anikushka's wife was hawling as though she were being slaughtered and lamenting so bitterly that the old man's heart sank. To get away from the heart-rending cry he went into the house and shut the door fast behind him. In the best room Dunya choked with agitation as she told Ilyinichna:

"I—I looked, Mummy dear, and Anikushka had hardly any head left at all, it was just a sticky mess. Oh, it was horrible! And he stank so you could have smelt him a verst away. Why they brought them home I don't know! But Christonya was lying on his back right along the wagon, his legs were hanging out from under his greatcoat. . . . He was clean and so white, so white he looked as though he'd been made of snow. Only under his right eye there was a little hole, no bigger than a kopeck piece, and behind his ear you could see the dried blood."

Pantelei spat furiously, went into the yard, took the axe and an oar, and limped off to the Don. As he went he called to Mishatka, who was playing close to the summer kitchen:

"Tell your granny I've rowed across the river to cut down brushwood. Do you hear, my dear?"

In the woods beyond the Don a quiet, gracious autumn had settled. The dry leaves were falling with a rustle from the poplars. The bushes of thorn seemed wrapped in flame, and among their scanty leaves the crimson berries glowed like little tongues of fire. The bitter, all-conquering scent of rotting oak bark filled the forest. Bilberries, dense and clinging, entangled the ground; and under the network of their creeping branches the ripe, smoky blue clusters of berries hid artfully from the sun. In the shade the dead grass was still beaded with dew and a spider's web glittered silver with its beads. Only the methodical tapping of the woodpecker and the twittering of the missel-thrushes disturbed the silence.

The stern silent beauty of the forest had a soothing effect on Pantelei. As he stepped quietly among the bushes, his feet scraping the damp coverlet of the fallen leaves, he thought to himself: "That's life, that is! A little while ago they were alive, and today they're being laid out for the grave. What a Cossack's been struck down. And it seems only the other day that he came and visited us, and stood down by the river when we fished out Darya. Ah, Christonya. So there was an enemy bullet waiting for you, too! And Anikushka—! What a cheery sort he was! He loved drinking and laughing, and now he's just a corpse!" Pantelei remembered Dunya's description and, with unexpected clarity calling to mind Anikushka's smiling, whiskerless, emasculated face, he simply could not imagine him lifeless, with shattered head. "I did

wrong to anger God with my boasting about Grigory, he reproached himself, as he recalled his talk with Beskhlebnov. "Mebbe Grigory himself is lying somewhere now, pecked to bits by bullets. God forbid it! Who will take care of us old folk then?"

A brown woodcock starting up from under a bush made Pantelei fall back in alarm. He aimlessly watched the little bird's slanting, impetuous flight, then went on. By a small forest pool he took a fancy to some clumps of brushwood and set to work to cut them down. As he worked he tried not to think of anything. In one year death had struck down so many dear ones and friends that at the very thought he was oppressed, and all the world faded and seemed to be enveloped in a film of black.

"Now I must cut down that bush! It's good brushwood, that! Just right for making wattle fencing," he talked aloud to himself, in order to distract himself his gloomy thoughts.

When he had worked long enough, he took off his jacket, sat down on the pile of chopped brushwood, and, avidly drawing in the pungent scent of faded leaves, gazed long at the distant horizon merged into an azure haze, and at the autumn-gilded copses gleaming in their last beauty. Not far off stood a maple sapling. It had a beauty that cannot be described, all gleaming under the cold autumnal sun, and its spreading branches, burdened with purple foliage, were unfolded like the wings of some legendary bird about to soar up from the earth. Pantelei sat for a long time admiring it, then he happened to glance down at the pool and in the still, clear water saw the dark backs

of great carp floating so close to the surface that he could see their fins and their flicking purple tails. There were about eight of them. Occasionally they disappeared under the green shields of water-lilies, then swam out again into clear water, darting at the wet, drowning leaves fallen from a willow. The dry autumn had made the pool shallow, and it would not take a great deal of effort to catch those carp. After a little search Pantelei found a sack without a bottom to it, left beside a neighbouring pond. He returned to the pool, slipped off his trousers, and, groaning and shivering with the cold, waded through the water with the sack, pressing its lower edge against the bottom of the pool. Now and then he thrust his hand inside, feeling sure a powerful fish would be splashing and bubbling in it. His labours were crowned with success: he managed to catch three carps, each weighing a good ten pounds. But he could not continue his fishing any longer, for the cold had given him cramp in his lame leg. Satisfied with his catch, he wiped his legs dry, dressed, and again set to work to cut down brushwood in order to get warm. All the same, he had done a good day's work. It wasn't everybody's luck to catch three fish nearly thirty pounds in weight like that! The fishing had distracted his thoughts, and driven away his gloomy mood. With the intention of returning later to catch the remaining fish, he carefully hid the sack, looking about him anxiously, to make sure no one had seen him as he tipped out the fat, golden, almost pig-like carp on to the bank. Then he strung the fish on a switch, lifted his bundle of

brushwood, and unhurriedly made his way to the river.

With a satisfied smile he told Ilyinichna of his fisherman's luck and once more admired the ruddy copper hue of the carp. But Ilyinichna was not ready to share his raptures. She had been to look at the dead men and had come back tear-stained and sorrowful.

"Are you going to see Anikushka?" she asked.

"No, I shan't. Haven't I ever seen dead men before? I've seen enough to last my lifetime."

"You ought to go. Other folk'll think it strange; they'll say you didn't even call to pay your last respects."

"Oh, leave me alone, for Christ's sake! He wasn't godfather to my children, and there's no reason why I should pay my last respects," the old man snapped back furiously.

Nor did he go to the funeral; he rowed across the river early in the morning and spent all day in the forest. While he was in the forest he heard the bell tolling and felt impelled to take off his cap and cross himself. But then he grew annoyed with the priest: was there any sense in ringing the bell so long? He could have tolled the bell and had done with it; but it went on ringing for a whole hour. And what good came of all that ringing? It only wrenched people's hearts and made them think of death more than they need. And as it was, in the autumn everything reminded you of death: the falling leaves, and the geese flying and crying through the azure sky, and the drooping withered grass.

Despite all his attempts to spare himself any kind of painful experience, it was not long before he suffered a fresh blow. One day after dinner Dunya glanced out of the window and said:

"Why, they're bringing back yet another man killed at the front. There's a saddled army horse tied behind the wagon, and they're driving ever so slowly. . . . One man's driving the horses, and there's a dead man lying under a greatcoat. The man driving is sitting with his back to us, and I can't see whether he's from our village or not. . . ." Dunya gazed fixedly, and her cheeks went whiter than linen. "But it's—it's—" she whispered incoherently, and suddenly gave a piercing scream: "It's Grisha they're bringing! It's his horse!" Crying, she ran out into the porch.

Ilyinichna covered her eyes with her palm and remained sitting at the table. Pantelei rose heavily from the bench and went towards the door, stretching out his hands before him as though he were blind.

Prokhor Zykov opened the gates, glanced at Dunya as she ran down the steps, and said in a cheerless tone:

"Here's a guest for you. . . . You weren't expecting us, were you?"

"Our darling! My darling brother!" Dunya groaned, wringing her hands.

Only then, as he stared at her face wet with tears, at Pantelei standing speechless on the steps, did Prokhor think of saying:

"Don't alarm yourselves. He's alive. He's got typhus."

Pantelei weakly leaned his back against the doorpost.

"He's alive!" Dunya shouted to him, laughing and weeping. "Grisha's alive! Do you hear! They've brought him home ill. Go and tell Mother. Well, what are you standing there for?"

"Don't alarm yourself, Pantelei Prokofyevich! I've brought him back alive, but don't ask after his health," Prokhor hurriedly assured them as he led the horses into the yard.

Pantelei took a few uncertain steps, then sank down on one of the steps. Dunya flew like a whirlwind past him into the house to reassure her mother. Prokhor halted the horses by the steps and looked at Pantelei.

"What are you sitting there for? Fetch a rug and we'll carry him in."

The old man sat without speaking. The tears were streaming from his eyes, but his face was rigid, and not a muscle quivered in it. Twice he raised his hand to cross himself and dropped it, powerless to raise it to his forehead. Something bubbled and gurgled in his throat.

"You've been scared out of your wits, I can see," Prokhor said sympathetically. "Why didn't I think of sending someone on to warn you? I was a fool, a real fool, and no mistake. Well, get up, Prokofyevich, the sick man's got to be carried in all the same. Where's a rug? Or shall we carry him in in our arms?"

"Wait a bit . . ." Pantelei said hoarsely. "My legs seem to have given way. . . . I thought he was killed. Glory be. . . ! I didn't expect. . . ." He tore away the buttons at the neck of his old shirt, threw open the collar, and gulped in air with his gaping mouth.

"Get up, get up, Prokofyevich!" Prokhor hurried him. "There's nobody else but us to carry him in, is there?"

With an effort Pantelei rose, went down the steps, threw back the greatcoat, and bent over the unconscious Grigory. Something began to gurgle in his throat, but he mastered himself and turned to Prokhor. "Take hold of his legs. We'll carry him."

They carried Grigory into the best room, took off his boots, undressed him, and laid him in the bed. Dunya anxiously called from the kitchen: "Father! Mother's bad! Come here!"

Ilyinichna was lying on the kitchen floor. Dunya was on her knees beside her, sprinkling water on her ashen face.

"Run and fetch old woman Kapitonovna, quick! She knows how to let blood. Tell her your mother must have her blood let, tell her to bring her instruments with her," Pantelei ordered.

But Dunya, a girl of marriageable years, could not run through the village with head uncovered; she snatched up a kerchief and said as she hurriedly wrapped her head:

"The children are frightened to death. Lord, what a lot of trouble in one day...! Look after them, Father, and I'll be back in a moment."

Possibly Dunya might even have stopped to glance into the mirror. But Pantelei, who had now recovered, looked at her with such a fierce expression that she fled headlong out of the kitchen.

As she ran out of the wicket-gate, she saw Aksinya. There was not a drop of blood in Aksinya's white

face. She was standing leaning against the wattle fence, her hands hanging lifelessly. No tears glittered in her misted black eyes, but there were so much suffering and dumb entreaty in them that Dunya halted for a second and said reluctantly, surprising herself:

"He's alive, alive! He's got typhus." She ran off along the side lane at full speed, steadying her supple, dancing breasts with her hands.

From all sides inquisitive women were hurrying to the Melekhovs' yard. They saw Aksinya slowly walk away from the wicket-gate; then she suddenly hastened her steps, bowed her head, and covered her face with her hands.

XXV

Grigory was well again within a month. He first rose from his bed towards the end of November and, tall, and gaunt as a skeleton, walked unsteadily across the room and halted by the window.

A sprinkle of young snow gleamed, dazzling white on the ground and on the straw-thatched roofs. The tracks of sledge-runners were visible along the side lane. A bluish rime feathered the fences and trees, glittering in rainbow colours under the rays of the setting sun.

He stood gazing out of the window, smiling thoughtfully, stroking his moustache with his bony hands. One would have thought he had never seen such a glorious winter before. To him everything seemed unusual, imbued with freshness and meaning. It was as if his illness had strengthened his sight, and he

began to discover new objects in his surroundings, and to notice changes in things which he had known for many years.

He unexpectedly developed a far from characteristic curiosity and interest in everything occurring in the village and on the farm. Everything in his life acquired a new, secret significance, everything attracted his attention. With eyes expressing a slight astonishment he gazed at the new world which had been revealed to him; a simple, childlike smile hovered on his face, in strange contrast to his harsh features, to the expression of his animal-like eyes, and softening the harsh folds at the corners of his lips. Occasionally he picked up and examined some household object which he had known since childhood, tensely knitting his brows and looking at it as though he were someone recently arrived from a strange, distant land and seeing it all for the first time. Ilyinichna was amazed beyond measure one day to find him examining a distaff from all sides. The moment she entered the room he stepped away from the distaff, looking a little sheepish.

Dunya could not look at his bony, lanky figure without laughing. He walked about the room dressed only in his underlinen, holding up his slipping pants with one hand, hunching his back, using his thin, shanky legs uncertainly. And when he sat down he was always afraid of falling and clutched at something with his hand. His black hair, grown long during his illness, was falling out; his curly, grizzled forelock was lank.

He got Dunya to help him shave his head, and when he turned his face to his sister she let the razor

drop to the floor, clutched at her belly, and, falling on the bed, nearly choked with laughter.

Grigory patiently waited for her to laugh her fill; but at last he could wait no longer and said in a feeble, quivering tenor voice:

"Look out, mind you don't go too far! You'll be ashamed afterwards, you're a woman now, you know!" A hint of resentment sounded in his words.

"Oh, my brother! My dear! I'd better go.... I haven't the strength! Oh, what do you look like! Why, you're an absolute scarecrow!" Dunya could hardly get the words out between her attacks of laughter.

"I'd like to see what you'd look like after typhus! Pick up the razor! Now!"

Ilyinichna took up the cudgels on his behalf, saying in a vexed tone:

"And what are you neighing at, after all? You're a fool, Dunya!"

"But see what he looks like, Mother," Dunya said, wiping away her tears. "His head's all bumps, it's as round as a water-melon and just as dark.... Oh, I can't any more!"

"Give me a mirror," Grigory asked.

He looked into the tiny scrap of mirror and then himself laughed long and noiselessly.

"What did you shave your head for, Son? You'd have done better to have left it as it was," Ilyinichna said discontentedly.

"So you think it's better to go bald?"

"Well, even as you are it's a terrible disgrace...."

"Oh, you're the limit!" Grigory said angrily, whipping up a soapy foam with his brush.

Unable to go outside the house, he spent much time with the children. He talked with them about everything, but avoided mentioning Natalya. One day, however, Polyushka nestled against him and asked:

"Daddy, won't Mummy be coming back to us?"

"No, dear; people don't come back from there."

"From where? From the cemetery?"

"You see, the dead just don't come back."

"But is she quite dead?"

"Why, what else could she be? Of course she's dead."

"But I thought she might start missing us and come . . ." Polyushka whispered almost inaudibly.

"Don't think about her, my dear; it's better not to," Grigory said huskily.

"How can I help thinking of her? But don't they ever come to see you? Not even for a tiny bit? Never?"

"No. Now go and play with Mishatka." Grigory turned away. Evidently his illness had sapped the strength of his will; tears appeared in his eyes and, to hide them from the children, he stood a long time at the window, his face pressed to the glass.

He did not like talking to the children about the war, but Mishatka was more interested in the war than in anything else in the world. He frequently pestered his father with questions: how did people fight, and what were the Reds like, and what were they killed with, and what for? Grigory's face clouded, and he answered irritably:

"Off on the old tune again? What is it worrying you for—this war? Let's talk of how we'll catch fish with hooks when summer comes. Shall I make you

a hook? As soon as I can get out into the yard I'll twist you a line of horsehair."

He felt an inward shame whenever Mishatka began to talk about the war; he could find no answers whatever to the child's artless and simple questions. Who can say why? Perhaps it was because he himself had not found answers to these questions. But it was not so easy to shake off Mishatka; he seemed to listen attentively to his father's plans for going fishing, but soon he would be asking again:

"Daddy, have you killed anybody in the war?"

"Stop plaguing me, you little bur!"

"Do you feel afraid when you kill them? Does the blood run out of them when they're killed? Lots of blood? More than out of a chicken or a sheep?"

"I've told you to stop all this talk!"

Mishatka was silent for a moment, then said thoughtfully:

"I saw Grandad kill a sheep a little while ago. I wasn't afraid.... Maybe just a little teeny bit, but not really."

"Drive him away!" Ilyinichna said angrily. "He'll grow up to be another murderer. A real criminal! All he talks about is the war; he doesn't know anything else to talk about. Whoever heard of a child talking about this accursed war, God forgive me? Come here! Take this pancake, it'll keep you quiet for a moment at least."

But every day the war reminded them of its existence. Cossacks returned from the front, called to see Grigory and told how the generals Shkuro and Mamontov had been smashed by Budyonny's cavalry, of

the unsuccessful battles at Orel, and the retreats which had set in on all the fronts. Two more Tatarsky Cossacks had been killed in the fighting at Gribovskaya and Kardail; Gerasim Akhvatkin had been brought home wounded, and Dmitry Goloshchokov had died of typhus. Grigory recalled all the Cossacks of his village who had been killed in the two wars, and it turned out that not one home in Tatarsky was left without its dead.

Grigory was still unable to leave the house when the village ataman brought an instruction he had received from the district ataman, ordering him to inform Squadron Commander Melekhov that he was to present himself immediately before a medical commission for further examination.

"Write back and tell him that as soon as I learn to walk I'll return of my own accord, without any reminders," Grigory said angrily.

The front steadily drew nearer the Don. In the village there began to be renewed talk of retreat. A little later an order issued by the regional ataman, commanding all adult Cossacks to take part in the retreat, was read out in the market square.

Pantelei came home from the square, told Grigory of the order, and said: "What shall we do?"

Grigory shrugged his shoulders.

"What can we do? We've got to retreat. Even without the order everybody will go."

"I'm talking about you and me—shall we go together, or how?"

"We can't go together. In a day or two I'll ride to Vyeshenskaya and find out what forces are to

pass through there, and I'll join up with one of the regiments. But the thing for you to do is to flee as a refugee. Or do you want to join up with a military force?"

"God forbid!" Pantelei said in alarm. "In that case I'll ride with old gaffer Beskhlebnov; the other day he invited me to ride with him for company. He's a peaceable old man, and he's got a good horse, so we'll harness up and gallop along with a pair of horses. It's about time the mare got rid of some of her fat. She's been eating like a pig, and she kicks something terrible."

"Well, then you go with him," Grigory willingly supported the idea. "But meantime let's talk over the way you're to go, for maybe I shall have to take the same road."

He took a map of southern Russia out of his field case and showed his father the villages through which the old man would have to drive, then began to write the names down on paper. But the old man, who had been respectfully examining the map, remarked:

"Stop, don't write them down! Of course, you understand these things better than me, and a map's a serious matter. It never lies and it shows you the straight road. But how am I to keep to that road if it isn't suitable for me? You say that first we've got to drive through Karginskaya. I can see it's a straighter road that way, but all the same I've got to take a roundabout road."

"But why have you?"

"Because I've got a first cousin living in Latyshevo, and I can get food for myself and the horses there."

But if I put up with strangers I shall have to use my own food. And you say that according to the map I ought to drive through Astakhov village. That's the straighter road, I know, but I shall drive through Malakhovsky. I've got distant relations there too, and I can save my own hay and use other people's. Remember you can't carry a stack of hay along with you, and in a strange district you may find that you can't even buy hay, let alone beg it."

"But haven't you got any relations on the other side of the Don?" Grigory asked slyly.

"Yes, I have."

"So you'll go that way too, I suppose?"

"Don't talk rubbish," Pantelei flared up. "You speak to the point, and don't try to be funny! A fine time to make jokes! A clever man we've got in the family now!"

"There's no need for you to go visiting all your relations. A retreat's a retreat, and not a matter of visiting relations. It's not carnival time."

"Well, don't tell me the way, I know it without you."

"If you know, then go whichever way you like."

"It's no good my trying to drive according to your plans. Only a magpie flies straight; you've heard that said, haven't you? I might go driving the devil knows where, in places where maybe there aren't any roads in the winter-time at all. Were you really using your wits when you started talking such nonsense? And you commanded a division, too!"

Grigory and the old man wrangled for a long time, but, after thinking it over, Grigory had to admit that

there was a good deal of force in the old man's remarks, and he said in a conciliatory tone: "Don't be angry, Father; I won't try to make you follow my route. You drive as you wish. I shall try to find you on the other side of the Donets."

"You should have said that long ago," Pantelei rejoiced. "You go on suggesting all sorts of plans and routes, but the one thing you don't understand is that a plan's one thing, but horses can't go anywhere without fodder."

The old man made quiet preparations for departure even while Grigory was still ill: he had fed up his mare with unusual care, had repaired the sledge, had ordered new felt boots to be made for him, and had himself given them leather soles, so that they would not get soaked on wet roads; well in advance he had poured selected oats into sacks. Even for retreat he made ready like a true master of the house; he prudently prepared everything that might be of some use on the journey. An axe, a hand-saw, a chisel, shoe-repairing tools, threads, spare soles, nails, a hammer, a bunch of straps, ropes, a lump of pitch—everything down to horseshoes and farriers' nails was carefully wrapped in tarpaulin and could be laid in the sledge in a moment. He even proposed to take a steelyard with him, and when Ilyinchna asked what need he would have for a steelyard he reproachfully answered:

"You know, wife, the more you try, the more stupid you get. Do you mean to say you can't answer such a simple question for yourself? Shan't I have to buy chaff or hay by weight while I'm retreating? Do they measure hay out by the yard?"

"But won't people have scales of their own?" Ilyichna asked in amazement.

"How do you know what sort of scales they'll have?" Pantelei grew indignant. "Maybe all their scales are false, in order to give short weight to the likes of us. That's just it! We know the sort of people who live there! You buy thirty pounds, but you pay enough money for a pood.* And if I've got to stand such a loss every time we stop, it would be better for me to take my own steelyard with me. It won't weigh us down! But you can manage here without scales; what the devil would be the good of them to you? If the army comes it'll take hay without weighing it. All they're concerned about is carting it off. I've seen them, the hornless devils; I know them only too well!"

At first he even thought of taking a wagonette on the sledge, so as not to waste money buying one in the spring. But afterwards he thought better of it and gave up this hopeless idea.

Grigory also began to make ready. He cleaned his Mauser, his rifle, put his faithful sabre in good order. A week after his recovery he went out to see his horse and, looking at its gleaming crupper, satisfied himself that the old man had not fed only his own mare. He climbed painfully on the restive horse, gave it a good ride, and, on his return home, saw—or perhaps he only imagined he saw—someone wave to him with a tiny white handkerchief through the window of the Astakhovs' hut.

* Thirty-six pounds.

At a village assembly the menfolk of Tatarsky decided to leave all on one day. Two days the women spent baking and frying all kinds of provisions for the Cossacks' journey. The departure was fixed for December 12. The previous evening Pantelei put hay and oats in the sledge, and next morning, as soon as dawn began to break, he put on his great sheepskin overcoat, belted himself tightly, thrust his capacious leather driving gloves into his belt, said his prayers to God, and took leave of his family.

Soon an enormous baggage train stretched up the hill from the village. The women went out to the common pasturage and long, long waved their handkerchiefs to their departing menfolk.

But then a low breeze sprang up in the steppe, and through the seething, snowy mist neither the wagons slowly climbing the hill nor the Cossacks striding beside them were visible.

Before leaving for Vyeshenskaya, Grigory had a meeting with Aksinya. He went to see her in the evening, when lights were already lit in the village. Aksinya was spinning. Beside her Anikushka's widow was sitting knitting socks and telling some story. Seeing the stranger, Grigory curtly said to Aksinya:

"Come outside for a minute; I've got business with you."

In the porch he laid his hand on her shoulder and asked:

"Will you come with me in the retreat?"

She was long silent, thinking over her answer. Then she quietly said: "But how about the farm? And the house?"

"You must leave everything in someone's charge. We've got to retreat."

"But when?"

"I'll drive round for you tomorrow."

Smiling in the darkness, Aksinya said: "You remember I told you a long time ago that I'd go with you to the end of the world? And I'm just the same now. My love for you is true. I shall go and not once look back. When shall I be waiting for you?"

"In the evening. Don't bring much with you. Clothes and as much food as you can, that's all. Well, good-bye for now."

"Good-bye. But maybe you'll come in? She's going in a minute. I haven't seen you for so long! My darling, Grisha! But I was beginning to think you— But no, I won't say it."

"No, I can't come in. I've got to ride to Vyeshenskaya now. Good-bye. Be waiting for me tomorrow."

Grigory went out and passed through the wicket-gate. But Aksinya remained standing in the porch, smiling and rubbing her flaming cheeks with her palms.

In Vyeshenskaya the evacuation of the regional offices and organisations and the commissariat stores had already begun. At the regional ataman's office Grigory inquired about the position at the front. A youthful ensign acting as adjutant told him: "The Reds are close to Alexeyevskaya. We don't know what forces will pass through Vyeshenskaya, or whether any will pass through at all. You can see for yourself that nobody knows anything, everybody's in

a hurry to get away. . . . I'd advise you not to search for your regiment now, but to ride to Millerovo. It'll be easier for you there to find out where it is at the moment. In any case your regiment will be retreating along the railway line. Will the enemy be held up at the Don? No, I don't think so. Vyeshenskaya will be yielded without a struggle, that's definite."

Grigory returned home late at night. While Ilyichna was getting his supper ready she said:

"Your Prokhor turned up. He came about an hour after you'd gone and said he'd be coming back. But he hasn't been near us since."

Delighted at the news, Grigory hurriedly ate his supper, then went to see Prokhor. His orderly welcomed him with a cheerless smile and said: "I was beginning to think you'd dashed off to retreat straight from Vyeshenskaya."

"Where the devil have you sprung from?" Grigory asked, laughing and slapping his faithful orderly on the shoulder.

"From the front, of course."

"Hopped it?"

"Why, what makes you think that? A soldier like me run away? It was all above board. I didn't want to go off to the warm countries without you. We've sinned together, and we must ride together to the Last Judgement. Our affairs aren't worth a pinch of tobacco, you know."

"Yes, I know. Tell me how they came to release you from the regiment."

"That's a long story; I'll tell you later," Prokhor said evasively, and grew still more glum.

"Where's the regiment?"

"The devil knows where it is at the moment."

"Then how long have you been away from it?"

"I left some two weeks ago."

"Then where have you been since?"

"What a pest you are, by God!" Prokhor said discontentedly, and gave his wife a sidelong glance. "With your where and how and why.... Wherever I've been, I'm there no longer. I said I'd tell you, and that means I'll tell you. Hey, wife! Got any liquor? When I meet my commanding officer I ought to wet my whistle, so have you got anything to drink? No? Well, run along and get something, and see that you're back in a jiffy! You've forgotten military discipline while your husband's been away. You've got out of hand."

"And what are you letting off steam for?" his wife asked with a smile. "Don't you shout at me too much; you're not the real master here, you only spend a couple of days at home in a twelvemonth."

"Everybody shouts at me, and I don't shout at anybody except you. You wait till I've risen to the rank of general, then I'll shout at others. But meantime you grin and bear it; put on your uniform quick, and run!"

When his wife had put on her outdoor clothes and gone, Prokhor gave Grigory a reproachful look and said:

"You know, you haven't got the least understanding, Panteleyevich! I can't tell you everything with a woman present, and you go on pressing me with

your how and why and what. Well, have you got over your typhus?"

"Yes, I've got over it; now tell me about yourself. You're hiding something, you son of the enemy! Spit it out, what have you got mixed up in? How did you run away?"

"It's worse than just running away.... After I'd brought you home I returned to the regiment. They assigned me to the Third Troop in your squadron. But I'm terribly keen on fighting! I took part in two attacks, and then I thought: 'This'll be the end of me! You've got to find some hole, or you'll be done for, Prokhor, my boy!' And then, as luck would have it, the Reds began to press us so hard and there were such fierce battles that they didn't even give us time to breathe. Wherever the Reds broke through, there they shoved us; wherever there was any unreliability, there they shoved our regiment. Within a week eleven Cossacks in our squadron were gone from this earth, as though they'd been licked up by a cow's tongue. Well, and I got so fed up, I went real lousy with it!" Prokhor lit a cigarette, held out his pouch to Gri-gory, and unhurriedly went on: "And then it fell to me to go on a reconnaissance close to Liski. There were three of us. We were riding over a rise at a gentle trot, keeping our eyes wide open, when we saw a Red crawl out of a brook and put up his hands. We galloped up to him, but he shouted: 'Cossacks, I'm on your side. Don't cut me down, I'm one of you.' But the devil must have got hold of me, for I got wild for some reason, and I rode up to the man and said: 'You son of a bitch,' I said, 'if you've decided

to fight, then you oughtn't to surrender! You're a dirty swine,' I said. 'Can't you see that as it is we're only holding on by the skin of our teeth? And here you are surrendering, bringing us reinforcements!' And at that I laid my scabbard across his back. And the other Cossacks with me told him the same: 'What's the sense in fighting like that, turning and twisting in all directions? If you'd all come at us together, the war would have been finished by now.' But how the devil was I to know that this turncoat was an officer? Yet that's what he turned out to be! When I struck him with my scabbard he went pale and said quietly: 'I'm an officer, how dare you strike me! I served in the hussars in the old days, and I fell into the Reds' hands during the mobilization. You take me to your commander, and there I'll tell him everything.' We said: 'Hand over your documents.' But he proudly answers: 'I have no wish to talk to you; take me to your commander.' "

"But why didn't you want to talk about this in front of your wife?" Grigory asked in surprise.

"I haven't come to that point yet, and please don't interrupt. We decided to escort him to the squadron, but we were fools. We should have killed him on the spot, and that would have been the end of it. But we drove him in, as we were supposed to do, and a day later we found he was appointed commander of our squadron. That was a fine how-d'you-do! Then the band did begin to play! A day or two later he sent for me and asked: 'So you're fighting for a united, indivisible Russia, are you, you son of a bitch? What did you say to me when you took me prisoner? Do

you remember?' I tried to get out of it, but he wouldn't show me any mercy, and when he recalled that I'd struck him with my scabbard he shook all over. 'Do you know,' he said, 'that I'm a captain of a hussar regiment and a noble, and you, you boor, dared to strike me?' He sent for me once, he sent for me twice, and I never had any mercy from him. He ordered the troop commander to send me on outpost and guard duty out of turn, and shook fatigues on me like peas out of a pail. In a word, he made life a misery, the swine! He did the same to the other two who'd been on reconnaissance with me when we took him prisoner. The boys stood as much as they could, but at last one day they spoke to me and said: 'Let's put him out or our lives won't be worth living.' My conscience wouldn't allow me to kill him, so I thought it over and decided to tell the regimental commander all about it. We could have done it when we took him prisoner, but afterwards I couldn't raise my hand, somehow. I have to screw up my eyes when my wife cuts a chicken's throat, and this was a matter of killing a man."

"But you did kill him?" Grigory again interrupted.

"Wait a bit; you'll know all about it in due course. Well, I told the regimental commander. I went to see him, but he just laughed and said: 'It's no good your being upset, Zykov, once you struck him. He's quite right in restoring discipline. He's a good and intelligent officer.' So I left him, but I thought to myself: 'You can hang that good officer round your neck instead of a cross, but I'm not going to serve in his squadron!' I asked for a transfer to another squadron,

but nothing came of that either; they wouldn't do it. Then I thought of clearing out altogether. But that's easier said than done. They transferred us to the rear for a week's rest, and then the devil went and got me all messed up again. I decided the only thing to do was to get hold of some poor devil of a woman with the clap, then I'd be put on light sick duty, and then the retreat would start, and things would settle themselves. And—something I'd never done before—I began to run after the women, to see which of them looked the worst. But how can you tell? It isn't written on a woman's forehead that she's got this or that. So what was I to do?" Prokhor spat vigorously and listened to make sure his wife was not coming back.

Grigory covered his mouth with his hand to hide his smile. His eyes glittered with laughter as he asked: "And did you get the clap?"

Prokhor gazed at him with tearful eyes. His look was sad and calm, like that of an old dog that has had its day. After a brief silence he said: "Do you think it was so easy to get it? When you don't want it it's in the very air you breathe; but now I couldn't find it anywhere, even if I shouted aloud for it."

Half turning away, Grigory laughed soundlessly, then took his hand from his face and asked in a choking voice: "Don't torture me, for Christ's sake! Did you get it or not?"

"Of course it seems funny to you!" Prokhor said in an injured tone. "It's only fools who laugh at other people's misfortunes; at least, that's what I think."

"But I'm not laughing.... Well, and what happened?"

"Then I began to set my cap at the daughter of the house where we were quartered. She was a maiden some forty years old, or maybe a little younger. Her face was smothered in pimples, and she looked—well, in a word, the Lord defend us from all such! The neighbours hinted that recently she'd been visiting a doctor. 'Well,' I thought, 'I'm sure to get it from her!' And I hung around her just like a young cockerel; I strutted and puffed up my crop and said all sorts of things to her.... And where they all came from I don't rightly know myself." He smiled guiltily and even seemed to cheer up a little at the memory. "I promised to marry her, and talked all sorts of filth.... At last I won her over, and the matter came very near to sin. Then she suddenly goes and bursts into tears. I tried to calm her and said: 'Maybe you're ill? But that's nothing, that's all the better.' But I myself got frightened; it was night-time, and supposing someone heard our noise and came creeping into the chaff-shed where we were. 'Don't shout, for Christ's sake!' I said. 'And if you're ill, don't be afraid; I love you so much that I'm ready for anything!' But she says: 'My dear Proshenka, I'm not ill in the least. I'm an honest girl, and I'm afraid; that's why I cried out.' Believe me or not, Grigory Panteleyevich, but as she said that to me I broke into a cold sweat. 'Lord Jesus!' I thought, 'the mess I've got into! That's the last straw!' And I roared at her: 'But what did you go running to the doctor for? Why did you go around giving people the wrong ideas?' 'I went to see him,' she said, 'to get some ointment to clear my face.' Then I clutched my head and told her:

'Get up and go away this minute, damn you, you horrible witch! I don't want you honest, and I shan't marry you!'

Prokhor spat still more violently, and reluctantly went on: "And so all my labours were in vain. I went to the hut, collected my belongings, and shifted to other quarters the very same night. Then the boys gave me a hint, and I got what I was in need of from a certain widow. Only this time I went straight to the point. 'Are you ill?' I asked her. 'Yes, I am a bit,' she said. 'Well,' I said, 'I don't want a hundredweight of it.' I gave her a twenty-ruble note for helping me out, and the next day I boasted my achievement and got put on light duty. And from there I came straight home."

"Did you come without your horse?"

"Of course not! I've come on my horse and in full fighting order. The boys sent my horse to where I was on sick-leave. But that's not important; you advise me what I'm to tell the wife. Or maybe I'll save myself the trouble and come and spend the night with you?"

"No, by hell! You spend the night at home! Say you're wounded. Have you got any bandages?"

"I've got my field dressing."

"Well, then use that."

"She won't believe me," Prokhor said despondently. But he got up nonetheless. He rummaged in his saddle-bag, went into the best room, and whispered from there: "If she comes back, keep her talking, and I'll be out in a second."

As Grigory rolled himself a cigarette he thought over his plans for departure. "We'll harness both the

horses to a sledge," he decided. "We must leave in the evening, so that our people don't see Aksinya with me. Though they'll find out all the same."

"I didn't finish telling you about the squadron commander." Prokhor limped out of the best room and sat down at the table. "Our men killed him off the third day after I went sick."

"Really?"

"God's truth! They shot him in the back in a fight, and that was the end of him. So I got the clap for nothing, that's what riles me."

"Didn't they catch the one who did it?" Grigory, absorbed in thoughts of leaving Tatarsky, asked abstractedly.

"What chance had they got of looking for him? The retreat was so general that there was no time to look for anybody! But where's that wife of mine got to? I badly want a drink! When are you thinking of leaving?"

"Tomorrow."

"Can't we leave it for just one more day?"

"What for?"

"I could shake the lice off me at any rate. It's no fun riding with them!"

"You can shake them off on the road. This is no time for hanging about. The Reds are only two days' march from Vyeshenskaya."

"Are we leaving in the morning?"

"No, at night. We've only got to get to Karginskaya; we'll spend the night there."

"But won't the Reds catch us?"

"We must be ready to move on at any moment. . . . I was thinking—I thought of taking Aksinya Astakhova with me. You don't mind, I suppose?"

"What's it to do with me? You can take a couple of Aksinyas if you like. . . . It'll be rather a lot for the horses though."

"She's not very heavy."

"It's awkward travelling with women. . . . And why the cholera must you have her with you? As if we wouldn't have enough trouble without her!" Prokhor sighed. With eyes averted, he added: "I knew you'd be dragging her about with you. You're always acting the husband! Ah, Grigory Panteleyevich, the knout's long been weeping bitter tears for you!"

"That's nothing to do with you," Grigory said coldly. "Don't go gabbling to your wife about it."

"Have I ever gabbled to her about it? You ought to know me better! But who is she going to leave her house with?"

They heard steps in the porch. Prokhor's wife entered. Snow was sparkling on her fluffy grey kerchief.

"Snowing hard?" Prokhor took glasses from the cupboard, and only then thought of asking: "But did you bring anything?"

His crimson-cheeked wife took two steaming bottles from her bosom and set them on the table.

"Well, now we'll be able to have one for the road!" Prokhor said cheerfully. He sniffed at the vodka and pronounced: "First rate! And as strong as the devil!"

Grigory drank two small glasses of vodka, then pleaded that he was tired and went home.

XXVI

"Well, the war's all over. The Reds are driving us so hard now we'll go on falling back till we dip our arses in the briny," said Prokhor as they drove up the hill.

Below them lay Tatarsky wrapped in a bluish haze. The sun had set behind the snowy pink selvage of the horizon. The snow scrunched crisply under the sledge-runners. The horses moved at walking pace. Grigory reclined in the back of the two-horse sledge, his shoulders against the saddles. Aksinya sat beside him, wrapped in a sheepskin jacket trimmed with fur. Her black eyes glittered and sparkled joyously under her white fluffy kerchief. Grigory glanced sidelong at her, at her cheek tenderly crimsoned by the frost, at her thick black eyebrows and the gleaming bluish whites under the long curve of her rimed lashes. Aksinya looked about her with eager curiosity, gazing at the steppe in its pall of drifted snow, at the road worn down to a smooth polish, at the distant misty horizons. Everything was new and unusual to her, who hardly ever left her house; everything attracted her attention. But occasionally, lowering her eyes and feeling the pleasant, nipping cold of the rime on her lashes, she smiled at the thought that the dream which had so long held her captive had so strangely and unexpectedly come true. Now she and Grigory were driving somewhere far away from Tatarsky, far from her native and hated district, where she had suffered so much, where she had spent half her life in torments with an unloved husband, where everything aroused

oppressive memories. She smiled as with all her body she felt Grigory's presence beside her, and she did not think either of the price at which she had gained this happiness or of the future, which was enveloped in as dark a haze as those steppe horizons that beckoned her into the distance.

Happening to look round, Prokhor noticed the tremulous smile on Aksinya's crimson and frost-swollen lips and asked in an aggrieved tone: "Well, what are you grinning for? Just like a bride! Are you glad to get away from home?"

"Do you think I'm not?" Aksinya asked in a ringing voice.

"A fine thing to be glad about! You're a fool, woman. You don't know yet how this little trip will end, so don't be too quick to smirk! You save your teeth!"

"The future won't be any worse than my past has been."

"It makes me feel sick to look at you both..." Prokhor furiously brought his whip down across the horses.

"Well, turn away and stuff your finger in your mouth!" Aksinya advised him with a laugh.

"Now you're showing again what a fool you are! Have I got to be sticking my finger in my mouth all the way to the sea? A fine idea!"

"What's making you feel sick?"

"Why don't you keep quiet! Got mixed up with a man who's not your own and riding the devil knows where! But supposing Stepan was to turn up at the village now, what then?"

"Do you know what, Prokhor? You shouldn't get mixed up in our affairs," Aksinya said, "or you may have a spell of bad luck too!"

"I'm not getting mixed up in your affairs. You needn't snap back at me like that! I can say what I think, can't I? Or am I your coachman, and I'm only to talk to the horses? That's another fine idea! You can be annoyed or not, as you like, Aksinya. But you ought to be whipped with a good switch, whipped and ordered not to cry out! But don't try to frighten me about luck! I carry my luck everywhere with me. I've got a special kind; it won't sing, but it won't let me sleep. . . . Now, you devils! Always trying to take it easy, you lop-eared Satans!"

Grigory listened, smiling, and at last said in a pacifying tone: "Don't start swearing at each other when we're hardly out of the village! We've got a long road before us, you'll have plenty of time for that. What are you plaguing her for, Prokhor?"

"I'm plaguing her," Prokhor answered harshly, "because she'd better not contradict what I say! I'm thinking at this moment that there's nothing worse than women in the whole wide world. They're a lot of stinging nettles. . . . You know, brother, women were God's very worst invention! If I had to deal with them there wouldn't be a smell of woman left on the earth! That's how bad I'm feeling about them just now. And what are you laughing at? Only a fool laughs at other people's misfortunes. Hold the reins; I'm getting out for a minute."

Prokhor went on foot for some time, then he made himself comfortable in the sledge and held his peace.

They spent the night in Karginskaya and set out again after breakfast next morning. By nightfall they had put some sixty versts of road between them and Tatarsky.

Endless trains of refugee wagons were dragging southward. Close to Morozovsky they fell in with the first Cossack troops. Squadrons numbering only thirty to forty mounted men went past followed by their baggage trains. The farther they went, the more difficult they found it to get quarters for the night. By evening all possible quarters in the villages were occupied, and there was not even stabling for the horses, far less room for themselves. In one of the Tavrida districts Grigory drove from door to door in the vain search for a sleeping-place, and in the end they were compelled to pass the night in a shed. Their clothes were wet through with the blizzard, and by morning they were frozen solid, and jarred and cracked with their every movement. They hardly slept a wink all night, and only just before dawn did they manage to get warm by lighting a camp-fire of straw in the yard.

In the morning Aksinya timidly suggested:

"Grisha, don't you think we might spend the day here? We've had such a bad night with the cold and we got hardly any sleep, so we ought to take a little rest."

Grigory agreed. After some difficulty he found a free corner. At dawn the other refugees had driven on, but a field hospital carrying over a hundred wounded and typhus cases also remained in the village for the day.

In one tiny room ten Cossacks were sleeping on the dirty earthen floor. Prokhor brought in a horse-cloth and the sack of food, spread some straw right by the door, took a soundly sleeping old Cossack by the feet and dragged him to one side, and said with rough tenderness to Aksinya: "Lie down here, you're so worn out that you don't look your old self."

Towards nightfall the village again filled up with people. All night camp-fires flamed in the side lanes, all night the place was noisy with human voices, neighing horses, grating sledge-runners. It was barely light when Grigory aroused Prokhor and whispered: "Get the horses harnessed up. We've got to get moving."

"Why so early?" Prokhor asked with a yawn.

"Listen!"

Prokhor raised his head from his saddle pommel and heard a distant, muffled rumble of gun-fire.

They washed and after a meal of bacon-fat drove out of the yard, which was just beginning to stir. People were bustling round the rows of sledges and in the early morning darkness a voice shouted hoarsely: "No, you can bury them yourselves! It'll take us half the day to dig a grave for six men."

"Is it our job to bury them?" another voice answered calmly in Ukrainian.

"You'll bury them all right!" shouted the hoarse voice. "If you don't want to, let them lie and stink your yard out. It's nothing to do with me."

"But listen, doctor, if we bury all the refugees that die here, we'll be at it all the time. Won't you do it yourselves?"

"Go to hell, you holy idiot! Do you expect me to hand the hospital over to the Reds for your sake?"

As he drove round the sledges standing in the middle of the road, Grigory said: "No one wants the dead...."

"No one here can be bothered with the living, let alone the dead," Prokhor responded.

All the northern districts of the Don were pouring southward. Innumerable refugees' baggage trains were streaming across the railway line from Tsaritsin to Likhaya and converging on Manych. At every stop during their first week of travelling Grigory inquired for his fellow-villagers from Tatarsky, but he found none in any of the villages through which he passed. In all probability his father and the others had kept more to the left and, avoiding the Ukrainian settlements, driven through the Cossack villages to Oblivskaya. Only on the thirteenth day did he come upon traces of them. On putting up for the night, he happened to learn that a Cossack from the Vyeshenskaya District was lying ill with typhus in the next hut. He went to find out where the man was from and, entering the low-ceilinged, tiny room, saw the old man Obnizov lying on the floor. From him he learned that the Tatarsky refugees had left this same village two days previously; many of them had fallen ill with typhus, two of them had already died on the road, and Obnizov had been left behind on his own request.

"If I get better and the Red comrades have mercy on me and don't kill me, I'll make my way home somehow. And if not, I'll die here. It's all the same

where I die; wherever death comes it's anything but sweet..." the old man declared as Grigory said good-bye to him.

Grigory asked the old man about his father, but Obnizov answered that he had no news of him, for he himself had been on one of the last sledges, and he had not seen Pantelei Prokofyevich since they passed through Malakhovsky village.

Grigory had more luck in finding quarters at their next stop. In the first house he entered he came upon Cossack acquaintances from Verkhne-Chirskoye village. They made room for him, and he made his party comfortable by the stove. Fifteen refugees were lying packed like fish in barrels; three of them were ill with typhus, and another was suffering from frost-bite. The Cossacks cooked some millet porridge with bacon-fat for supper and hospitably offered some to Grigory and his companions. Prokhor and Grigory ate heartily, but Aksinya refused to touch the food.

"Why, aren't you hungry?" Prokhor asked. During the past few days he had inexplicably changed in his attitude to Aksinya, and now he spoke to her roughly but sympathetically.

"I'm feeling a little sick..." Aksinya threw her kerchief around her head and went out into the yard.

"She hasn't fallen ill, has she?" Prokhor asked Grigory.

"Who's to know?" Grigory put down his plate of porridge and went out after her. He found her standing by the steps, her hand pressed to her breast. He put his arms around her and anxiously asked:

"What's the matter, dear?"

"I'm feeling sick, and I've got a headache."

"Come into the hut and lie down."

"You go in; I'll follow in a minute."

Her voice was thick and toneless, her movements sluggish. Grigory watched her closely as she entered the stiflingly hot room; he noticed the crimson flush on her cheeks, the suspicious brightness in her eyes. His heart sank: she was obviously ill. He remembered that the previous day she had complained of shivering and dizziness, and when he awoke early that morning, he noticed she had been sweating so much that the curly hair on her neck was as wet as though she had just washed it. He had lain gazing at her as she slept, and had not dared to rise for fear of disturbing her rest.

She had bravely borne the privations of the journey, she had even cheered Prokhor on, when more than once he had said: "What the devil is this war for, and who thought of it? You drive on and on all day, and there's nowhere to spend the night, and you don't know how long the rotten business will last." But that day she had failed to keep up her spirits. When they lay down to sleep, Grigory had the impression that she was weeping.

"What's the matter?" he asked in a whisper. "Where do you feel ill?"

"I'm ill all right. . . . Now what shall we do? Will you leave me?"

"Well, you are silly! Why should I leave you? Don't cry, perhaps you've only caught a chill on the road, and you're frightened already."

"Grisha dear, it's typhus."

"Don't talk nonsense! There's no sign of it; your forehead is quite cool, why should it be typhus?" Grigory comforted her. But in his heart of hearts he knew it was typhus, and wondered miserably what they could do with her if she had to take to her bed.

"Oh, it's hard to ride like this!" she whispered, huddling close to him. "Look at the lot of people that crowd into the quarters every night. The lice will eat us up, Grisha! And I don't get a chance to look after myself, because of the men. . . . Yesterday I went into a shed and undressed, and I had so many lice on my shirt—Lord, I've never seen such a sight in all my life! I feel sick when I think of it, and I don't want to eat. . . . But did you see how many that old man lying on the bench yesterday had got? They were crawling all over his coat."

"Don't think about them! You've got yourself interested in a fine subject! Lice are only lice; you don't count them when you're in the service," Grigory whispered irritably.

"I'm itching all over."

"Everybody's itching all over; what can we do about it now? Keep going! When we get to Yekaterinodar we'll have a good wash."

"But we can't put on clean clothes!" Aksinya said with a sigh. "They'll be the death of us, Grisha!"

"You get off to sleep; we shall be setting out early in the morning."

Grigory could not sleep for hours. Nor did Aksinya sleep. She sobbed quietly more than once, covering her head with her great sheepskin coat; then she tossed and turned for a long time, sighed, and dozed

off only when Grigory turned to her and put his arms round her. During the night he was disturbed by a loud knock. Someone was banging on the door and shouting:

"Hi, there, open the door or we'll break it down! You're sleeping soundly, you devils!"

The master of the house, an elderly and inoffensive Cossack, went out into the porch and asked:

"Who's there? What do you want? If you want somewhere to spend the night, it's no good coming here. We're full already and haven't even got room to turn over."

"Open the door, I tell you!" came a further shout from outside. The next moment half a dozen armed Cossacks flung the door wide open and poured into the front room.

"Who have you got spending the night here?" asked one of them, a man iron-black with the frost, hardly able to move his frozen lips.

"Refugees. But who are you?"

Without answering him, one of the Cossacks strode into the best room and shouted:

"Hey, you! Stretched yourselves out nicely, haven't you? Get out of here at once! Troops are to be quartered here. Get up, get up! And hurry up about it or we'll soon shake you out!"

"Who are you, to shout like that?" Grigory asked hoarsely, and slowly got up.

"I'll show you who I am!" The Cossack strode towards Grigory, and in the dim light of the little paraffin lamp the barrel of a pistol gleamed dully in his hand.

"You're very smart, aren't you..." Grigory said softly. "Well, show us your toy!" With a swift movement he seized the Cossack by his wrist and squeezed it with such force that the man groaned and opened his fingers. The pistol dropped with a muffled thud on the horsecloth. Grigory pushed the Cossack away, swiftly bent, picked up the pistol, put it in his pocket, and said calmly: "And now let's have a talk. What regiment are you from? How many of you smart fellows are there?"

Recovering from his surprise, the Cossack shouted: "Boys! This way!"

Grigory went to the door. Standing on the threshold, he leaned his back against the doorpost and said:

"I'm a squadron commander of the 19th Don Regiment. Quieter now! Stop shouting! Who's that barking? Well, my dear Cossack comrades, what are you making all this fuss for? Who are you going to shake out? Who gave you such powers? Quick march out of here!"

"And what are you bawling for?" one of the Cossacks said loudly. "We've seen all sorts of squadron commanders! Have we got to spend the night in the yard? Everybody out of the house! We've been given orders to turn all the refugees out, understand? And you're kicking up all this fuss! We've seen the likes of you before!"

Grigory went right up to the speaker and hissed through clenched teeth:

"You've never seen anyone like me before. Do you want me to make a couple of fools out of the one you are? I'll do it! Don't back away! This isn't my pistol,

I took it from your man. Here, give it back to him, and clear out quick, before I start fighting, or I'll flay the skin off you!" He gently turned the Cossack round and pushed him towards the door.

"Shall I give him one?" a big Cossack with his face enveloped in a camel-hair cowl asked reflectively. He was standing behind Grigory closely examining him; his enormous, leather-soled felt boots creaked as he shifted from foot to foot.

Grigory turned to him and, losing command of himself, clenched his fists. But the Cossack raised his hand and said in an amicable tone:

"Listen to me, Your Excellency, or whatever you call yourself. Wait a bit, don't raise your fist! We'll avoid any trouble. But in these times don't push the Cossacks too hard! Hard times are coming again now, like in 1917. You might run up against some desperate characters, and they wouldn't make two, but five of you! We can see you've got plenty of guts and, judging by your speech, you were born one of us. So you behave a little quieter or you'll run into trouble...."

The man from whom Grigory had taken the pistol said irritably: "Don't stand there reading sermons to him! Let's go to the next hut." He was the first to stride to the door. As he passed Grigory he gave him a sidelong glance and said regretfully: "We don't want to be bothered with you, officer, or we'd christen you!"

Grigory twisted his lips contemptuously and replied:

"Would you do it yourself! Get on, get on, before I take your trousers down! So a Baptist's turned up now! Pity I gave you your pistol back; a dare-devil like you would look better with a sheep comb than a pistol."

"Come on, boys, let him go to the devil! If you don't stir up muck it won't stink!" one of the other Cossacks, who had taken no part in the conversation, remarked with a good-natured chuckle.

The Cossacks went cursing to the door, making a loud clatter with their frozen boots.

"Don't dare open that door again!" Grigory sternly ordered the master of the house. "They can knock and go away. And if they don't, wake me up!"

The Verkhne-Chirskoye men, who had been aroused by the noise, lay talking in undertones among themselves.

"The way discipline's gone to pieces!" one of the old men sighed mournfully. "They talk to an officer as if he was any son of a bitch! That wouldn't have happened in the old days. They'd have been packed off for hard labour right away!"

"Talk? What's talk? Did you see how they were getting ready to fight? Didn't you hear him, that unfelled poplar in the cowl? 'Shall I give him one!' he says. What scoundrels they've become!"

"Why did you let them off so lightly, Grigory Pan-teleyevich?" one of the Cossacks asked.

Grigory listened to the talk with an amiable smile on his lips. As he wrapped himself in his greatcoat he answered:

"Well, what are you to do with them? They've got clean out of hand and won't listen to anyone; they just roam about in bands, with no one in charge of them. Who's to be their judge and commander? Their commander is simply anyone who shows himself stronger than they are. I don't suppose they've got one officer left in their whole unit. I've seen whole squadrons like that, like a pack of orphans. Well, let's get off to sleep."

Aksinya whispered to him: "But what made you go for them, Grisha? Don't go running up against men like that, for the love of Christ! They're wild enough to kill you."

"You sleep. We've got to be up early tomorrow. How do you feel? Any better?"

"Just the same."

"Your head still aching?"

"Yes, I'm afraid I shan't be getting up again. . . ."

Grigory laid his palm on her brow and sighed.

"You're giving off heat like a stove! Well, all right, don't worry! You're a healthy woman, you'll get over it!"

Aksinya made no answer. She was tormented with thirst. She went out several times into the kitchen, drank some of the unpleasantly warm water, and, mastering her nausea and giddiness, lay down again on the horse-cloth.

During the night four further parties came to the hut seeking quarters. They banged their rifle-butts on the door, opened the window-shutters, drummed on the windows, and went away only when the master, following Grigory's instructions, shouted from the

passage: "Clear out of here! This is a brigade headquarters."

At dawn Prokhor and Grigory harnessed up the horses. Aksinya struggled into her outdoor clothes and went into the yard. The sun was rising. Thin grey smoke was streaming from the chimneys into the azure sky. A rosy cloud floated high above, lit up from below by the sun. A heavy rime lay on the fences and on the roofs of the sheds. Steam was billowing from the horses' bodies.

Grigory helped Aksinya into the sledge and said: "Perhaps you could lie down. You'll find it more comfortable."

She nodded, gave him a grateful look when he carefully wrapped up her legs, and closed her eyes.

At noon, when they halted to feed the horses in a village some two versts off the main road, Aksinya could not climb out of the sledge. Grigory took her by the arm and led her to the house, and put her in the bed which the mistress hospitably let them have.

"Feeling bad, dearest?" he asked, bending over Aksinya's pale face.

She forced open her eyes, looked at him with misted pupils, and again dozed off into semi-consciousness. With trembling hands he removed the kerchief from her head. Her cheeks were as cold as ice, but her forehead was burning; little icicles had frozen on the temples, which were beaded with a fine sweat. Towards evening she lost consciousness altogether. A moment earlier she asked for a drink, whispering: "Only some cold water, some melted snow." She was silent for a moment, then said distinctly: "Call Grisha!"

"Here I am. What do you want, Aksinya dear?" Grigory took her hand and stroked it awkwardly and shyly.

"Don't leave me behind, Grisha dear!"

"I shan't leave you behind. What makes you think I shall?"

"Don't leave me behind in a strange place.... I shall die here."

Prokhor gave her a drink. She thirstily set her parched lips to the rim of the copper mug, drank a few drops, and with a groan let her head fall back on the pillow. Within five minutes she was talking disconnectedly and unintelligibly. As he sat at her head, Grigory distinguished a few words: "I must do the wash ... get some blue ... early. ..." Her incoherent speech faded into a whisper. Prokhor shook his head and said reproachfully: "I told you not to bring her on this trip. Now what are we going to do? It's a punishment, that's all it is, God's truth! Shall we spend the night here? Have you gone deaf, or what? I ask: shall we spend the night here or drive on?"

Grigory made no response. He sat huddled up, not taking his eyes off Aksinya's ashen face. The mistress, a hospitable and kind-hearted woman, indicated Aksinya with her eyes and quietly asked Prokhor: "Is she his wife? Are there any children?"

"Yes. And there are children too; we've got everything except good luck," Prokhor muttered.

Grigory went out into the yard and, seating himself on the sledge, smoked cigarette after cigarette. Aksinya would have to be left behind in the village; to

carry her on might be the death of her. He saw that clearly. He went into the house and sat down again by the bed.

"We'll spend the night here, shan't we?" Prokhor asked:

"Yes. And we may stop over tomorrow."

Shortly afterwards the master of the house arrived. He was a puny undersized peasant with sharp, crafty eyes; one of his legs had been cut off at the knee. Tapping with his wooden leg, he limped nimbly to the table, took off his outdoor clothes, gave Prokhor a sidelong look, and said: "So the Lord's sent us guests? Where are you from?" Without waiting for an answer, he ordered his wife: "Hurry up and give me something to eat. I'm as hungry as a dog."

He ate long and greedily. His shifty eyes frequently rested on Prokhor and on Aksinya's motionless form. Grigory came out of the best room and greeted him. The man nodded his head.

"Retreating?"

"Yes."

"So you've had enough of fighting, Your Excellency?"

"That's it, more or less."

"Who's that—your wife?" he nodded at Aksinya.

"Yes."

"What did you put her in the bed for? Where are we going to sleep?" He turned discontentedly to his wife.

"She's ill, Vanya, and I couldn't help feeling sorry for her."

"Sorry! You can't be sorry for all of them, and look how many there are going past! You'll crowd us out, Your Excellency!"

An unusual note of entreaty, almost of supplication sounded in Grigory's voice as, turning to the man and his wife, pressing one hand to his chest, he said:

"Good people, help me in my trouble, for Christ's sake! If we take her on any farther she'll die. Let us leave her with you. I'll pay you for looking after her, as much as you ask. And all my life I shall remember your kindness. . . . Don't say no, do me this favour!"

At first the master flatly refused, saying they had no time to look after a sick woman, and that they had no room for her. But at last, when he had finished his dinner, he said: "Well, no one's going to look after her for nothing. How much would you give us for looking after her? How much can you afford to offer for our trouble?"

Grigory drew all the money he had out of his pocket and held it out to the man. The peasant irresolutely took the packet of Don Government credit notes, spat on his fingers, counted them, and asked:

"But haven't you got any tsarist money?"

"No."

"Maybe you've got Kerensky rubles? This stuff isn't too safe. . . ."

"I haven't any either. If you like, I'll leave you my horse."

The man reflected for some time, then answered thoughtfully: "No. Of course, I'd take the horse; for us, peasants, a horse is the main thing to have. But in such times as these it isn't any use. If the Whites

don't take it the Reds will, and we shan't get anything out of it. I've got a little mare that's no good at all, and yet before you can look round they'll be leading her out of the yard." He was silent, thinking. Then, as though to justify himself, he added: "Don't think I'm a miser. God forbid! But judge for yourself, Your Excellency! She may lie a month, or even more, and it'll be nothing but giving her this, and taking that, and she's got to be fed, with bread and milk, an egg or two, and meat. And all that costs money; that's true, isn't it? And her clothes have got to be washed and she's got to be washed too, and all the other things.... My wife's busy with the house and farm, and she'd have to look after her. That's no easy matter. Don't grudge your money, add something more. I'm an invalid; you can see I've lost a leg. What good am I as an earner and worker? We live on what God sends us and manage with bread and kvass...."

With smouldering irritation Grigory said: "I'm not grudging anything, my kind fellow. I've given you all the money I've got. I can manage without money. What else do you want from me?"

"So you've given me all your money?" The man laughed distrustfully. "With your pay you ought to have saddle-bags packed with it."

"Tell me straight out," Grigory said, turning pale, "will you keep the sick woman or not?"

"No. If that's the way you're reckoning there's no reason to leave her with us." The man's voice took on an injured tone. "It's not so simple, you know.... An officer's wife, and all that ... the neighbours will

find out. And the comrades are on your heels; they'll hear about it and come down on us. No, in that case you take her away; maybe one of the neighbours will agree to look after her." With obvious regret he handed Grigory his money, took out his tobacco-pouch, and began to roll a cigarette for himself.

Grigory put on his greatcoat and said to Prokhor: "You stay by her; I'll go and look for other quarters."

He was lifting the door latch when the master stopped him.

"Wait a bit, Your Excellency. What's the hurry? Do you think I don't feel sorry for the poor woman? I'm very sorry for her, and I've been in the army myself and I respect your position and rank. But couldn't you add something to the money?"

Prokhor could not restrain himself any longer; livid with indignation, he roared:

"What else can we add, you legless asp? You ought to have your other leg chopped off, that's what you deserve! Grigory Panteleyevich! Let me shake him up a bit, and then we'll put Aksinya into the sledge and drive on. May he be triply cursed, the devil!"

The master heard Prokhor out without interruption and then said: "You've got no reason to insult me, soldier! This is a question to be settled so we're all satisfied, and there's nothing for us to snarl and quarrel about. What are you bawling for, Cossack? Do you think it's money I'm talking of? I wasn't thinking of that sort of extra at all. What I meant was that mebbe you'd got some extra equipment, a rifle, say,

or a revolver.... It's all the same to you whether you have them or not. But in these times it's a whole fortune to us. We've got to have weapons to guard the house with. That's what I was getting at. Give me back the money you offered and add your rifle into the bargain, and we'll shake hands on it. Leave us your sick woman; we'll look after her as though she was one of our own family. I give my oath on it."

Grigory looked at Prokhor and said quietly: "Give him my rifle and cartridges, then go and harness up.... Aksinya will stay.... God be my judge, I cannot carry her on to her death."

XXVII

The days dragged by grey and joyless. The moment they left Aksinya behind, Grigory lost all interest in everything. Each morning he climbed into the sledge and drove over the endless, snowy steppe; and each evening he sought quarters for the night and lay down to sleep. And so on, day after day. He was not interested in what was happening at the front, which was rolling steadily southward. He realized that all genuine, serious resistance was over, that the majority of the Cossacks had no intention of defending even their own districts, that, judging by all the signs, the White armies were at the end of their last campaign and, as they had not held up the Red advance at the line of the Don, they would be unable to hold it at the Kuban.

The war was coming to an end. The close was coming swiftly and inevitably. The Kuban Cossacks

were abandoning the front in thousands, scattering to their homes. The Don Cossacks were smashed. Bled white with fighting and typhus, with three quarters of its complement gone, the Volunteer Army was unable to resist the pressure of the Red Army as it swept forward on the wings of success. Rumours were to be heard among the refugees that there was growing indignation at General Denikin's brutal slaughter of the members of the Kuban Rada. It was said that the Kuban was organizing a rising against the Volunteer Army and apparently negotiations were already being carried on with representatives of the Red Army for the Soviet troops to have unhindered passage to the Caucasus. There was a stubborn rumour that the people of the Kuban and Terek were extremely hostile to the Don Cossacks and the Volunteer Army, and that already a big fight had occurred between a Don division and Kuban Cossack infantry.

At the halts Grigory listened attentively to the talk, and he grew every day more and more convinced of the final and inevitable defeat of the Whites. And yet at times he had a mournful hope that the danger would compel the disintegrated, demoralized, and mutually hostile White forces to unite, to renew their resistance and throw back the Red forces in their triumphant advance. But after the surrender of Rostov he lost that hope, and he did not believe the story that after fierce battles at Bataisk the Reds had begun to retreat. Oppressed by his inactivity, he wanted to link up with some military force. But when he suggested this to Prokhor, his orderly resolutely opposed the idea.

"You've gone clean out of your wits, Grigory Pan-teleyevich!" Prokhor declared indignantly, "What the devil should we go poking our noses into that hell for? The question's settled, you can see that for yourself. So why should we throw our lives away? Or do you think that the two of us can do any good? While no one tries to push us into the army by force, we've got to get out of trouble's way as quickly as possible. And you start all this daft talk! No, please just let's retreat quietly, as the old men do. You and me have had fighting enough and to spare during the past five years; let others try their hand now. Is that what I got the clap for, to be maimed again at the front? Thank you! Very kind of you! I'm so fed up with this war that my belly turns over every time I think of it. You can join up if you like, but I'm not going to. In that case I'll go into a hospital; I've had enough!"

After a long silence Grigory said: "Have it your way. We'll drive to the Kuban, and then we'll see."

Prokhor had his own methods. At every place with a large population he sought out the doctor and brought back powders or liquids. But he showed no great desire to cure himself of his trouble. When Grigory asked him why he took only one powder and threw away the rest, treading them diligently into the snow, he explained that he did not want to get rid of his disease altogether, but only to keep it from getting worse, so that, if he had to have a medical examination, it would be easier for him to get out of being allocated to a regiment. In one village a worldly-wise Cossack advised him to cure himself

with a brew made from ducks' feet. After that, whenever Prokhor drove into a village, he asked the first person he met: "Tell me, do you keep ducks in this village?" When the astonished inhabitant said there was no water in the neighbourhood and so there was no point in their keeping ducks, Prokhor hissed with devastating contempt: "You don't live like human beings! I suppose you've never heard a duck quack in all your born days. You steppe blockheads!" Turning to Grigory, he would add with bitter contempt: "A priest must have crossed our road. We're out of luck. If they'd got any ducks I'd buy one at once at any price, or I'd steal one, and then my affairs would be on the mend. But now my disease is playing about a bit too much! At first it kept me amused, though it wouldn't let me doze on the road. But now, curse it, it's becoming real punishment. I can't stay seated in the sledge."

When he found that Grigory was quite unsympathetic, he lapsed into silence and sometimes, icily incommunicative, drove for hours on end without saying a word.

Exhaustingly long seemed the days spent driving from point to point, but still longer were the endless winter nights. Time to think over the present and to recall the past Grigory had in abundance. He spent hours recalling the swiftly departed years of his strange and disordered life. Sitting in the sledge, fixing his misty eyes on the snowy expanses of the oppressively silent steppe, or lying at night with closed eyes and clenched teeth in some stifling, overcrowded little room, he thought only of Aksinya, sick,

unconscious, left behind in a little unknown village, and of his kinsfolk back in Tatarsky. Back there in the Don Region the Soviet regime had been established, and with gripping anxiety Grigory continually asked himself: "Surely they won't treat Mother or Dunya roughly because of me?" He at once reassured himself, recalling that again and again on the road he had heard that the Red Army marched in good order and behaved decently to the people of the occupied Cossack districts. His anxiety gradually died away; the idea that his old mother would have to answer for him seemed incredible, monstrous, quite unjustified. When he recalled his children his heart contracted with sorrow for a moment; he was afraid they would not escape typhus. Yet he felt that, with all his love for them, after Natalya's death no other sorrow could shake him so powerfully.

To give the horses a rest, he and Prokhor lived for four days in one of the winter huts of the Salsk steppe. During this time they more than once discussed what they should do next. They had hardly arrived at the hut when Prokhor asked: "Will our forces hold the front at the Kuban or go on to the Caucasus? What do you think?"

"I don't know. But does it make any difference to you?"

"A fine idea! Of course it makes a difference. At this rate they'll drive us right into some heathen country, somewhere under the Turks, and then it'll be a fine how-d'you-do."

"I'm not Denikin; don't ask me where they'll drive us to," Grigory answered.

"I'm only asking because I've heard a rumour that they'll stand on the defensive again at the Kuban river, and set out for home in the spring."

"Who's going to stand on the defensive?" Grigory laughed sneeringly.

"Why, the Cossacks and cadets. Who else is there?"

"You're talking rot! Can't you see what's happening all around? Everybody's trying to slip off as quick as possible, and who's going to put up any resistance?"

"Ah, my lad, I can see for myself that our affairs aren't worth a pinch of snuff, but I still can't believe it," Prokhor sighed. "But supposing it comes to a question of sailing to a foreign land, or crawling there like a crab, what will you do? Go?"

"Well, what will you do?"

"My position is: where you go, I go. I'm not being left behind alone if everybody else goes."

"That's just what I was thinking. Once you've got yourself into a sheep's pen, you've got to hang on to the sheep!"

"Sheep are foolish enough to go anywhere. No, that kind of talk's no good. Talk sense!"

"Don't keep nagging! We'll see when we get there. Why should we meet our troubles half-way?"

"All right, amen! I shan't ask you any more," Prokhor agreed.

But next day, when they went to fetch the horses, he took up the subject again.

"Have you heard anything about the Greens?" he asked tentatively, pretending to examine the handle of a pitchfork.

"Yes; what about them?"

"Well, what are these Greens that have turned up now? Whose side are they on?"

"The Reds'."

"Then why are they called 'Greens'?"

"The devil knows! Because they hide in the forests, I suppose."

"What do you say to you and me going Green?" Prokhor hesitantly suggested after prolonged reflection.

"I don't feel much like it."

"But apart from the Greens there isn't any way of getting home quickly, is there? It's all the same to me whether they're green devils or blue or egg-yellow devils, so long as they're against the war and let the soldiers go home. . . ."

"Wait a bit longer, and maybe something like that will turn up," Grigory advised.

At the end of January, one misty and thawing noon-day, Grigory and Prokhor arrived at the village of Belaya Glina. Some fifteen thousand refugees were crowded into the village, and a good half of them were ill with typhus. Cossacks in short English great-coats, short-cut sheepskins, and long Caucasian coats were striding through the streets in search of quarters and food for their horses, and horsemen and sledges were moving in all directions. Dozens of emaciated horses stood around the mangers in every yard, miserably chewing straw; in the streets and side lanes were abandoned sledges, army wagonettes, and ammunition chests. As they drove along one of the streets, Prokhor looked attentively at a high-standing

bay horse tethered to a fence and said: "Why, that's Cousin Andrei's horse! So our Tatarsky people must be here." He nimbly leaped out of the sledge and went into the house to inquire.

A few minutes later Prokhor's cousin and neighbour Andrei Topolskov came out of the hut, with his greatcoat flung around his shoulders. Accompanied by Prokhor, he strode gravely towards the sledge and gave Grigory a grimy hand, which stank of horses' sweat.

"Are you with our villagers?" Grigory asked.

"We're all suffering together."

"Well, what's the journey been like?"

"Like everybody else's. After each stop for the night we leave people and horses behind...."

"Is my father still alive and well?"

Topolskov stared past Grigory and sighed.

"I've got bad news, Grigory Panteleyevich—very bad.... Say prayers for your father; he yielded his soul to God yesterday evening. He died...."

"Is he buried?" Grigory asked, turning pale.

"I can't say. I haven't been round there yet today. I'll show you the house.... Keep to the right, Cousin; the fourth house on the right from the corner."

Prokhor drove up to a large house with a sheet-iron roof and halted the horses by the fence. But Topolskov advised him to drive into the yard.

"They're crowded a bit here too, with some twenty men. But you'll find room somewhere," he said as he jumped out of the sledge to open the gate.

Grigory was the first to enter the fiercely heated room. Acquaintances from his village were lying and

sitting closely packed on the floor. Some were mending boots or harness; three of them, including old Beskhlebnov, with whom Pantelei had driven, were eating soup at a table. At the sight of Grigory the Cossacks rose and answered his curt greeting in chorus.

"Where's my father?" he asked, taking off his sheepskin cap and looking around the room.

"I've got bad news.... Pantelei Prokofyevich is dead," Beskhlebnov quietly answered. He laid down his spoon, wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his coat, and crossed himself. "He went last night; may God take him to Himself!"

"I know. Is he buried yet?"

"Not yet. We were going to bury him today, but he's still here. We carried him into the best room, where it's cold. This way." Beskhlebnov opened the door to the next room and said as though apologizing: "The Cossacks didn't want to spend the night in the same room, the smell's pretty high, and besides, he's better here.... This room isn't heated."

In the spacious room there was a strong smell of hemp seeds and mice. All one corner was filled with a heap of millet and hemp; barrels of flour and butter were standing on a bench. Pantelei Prokofyevich lay on a horse-cloth in the middle of the room. Grigory drew Beskhlebnov aside, went into the room, and halted by his father.

"Two weeks he was ill," Beskhlebnov told him in an undertone. "He went down with typhus way back in Mechetka. And this is where your father found his rest.... Such is our life...."

Bending down, Grigory gazed at his father's face.

The features had been changed by illness and had grown strangely unfamiliar. Pantelei's pale, sunken cheeks were overgrown with a grey scrub, his moustache hung low over the mouth, his eyes were half-closed, and the bluish enamel of the whites had already lost its sparkling vitality and gleam. The old man's lower jaw was tied up with a red neckerchief, and against the red material the grey curly hair of the beard seemed still whiter, more silvery.

Grigory dropped to his knees to take one last attentive look and to fix that dear face in his memory and involuntarily shuddered with horror and disgust: over Pantelei's grey, waxen face, filling the sockets of the eyes and the furrowed cheeks, lice were crawling. They covered the face with a living, moving film; they swarmed in the beard, stirred among the eyebrows, and formed a solid band of grey round the stiff collar of his long blue jacket.

Grigory and two other Cossacks hacked out a grave with crow-bars in the frozen, iron-hard, clayey earth. Prokhor knocked a rough coffin together from bits of wood. At the close of the day they carried Pantelei Prokofyevich out and buried him in the alien Stavropol earth. And an hour later, as lights began to twinkle in the village, Grigory drove out of Belaya Glina in the direction of Novopokrovskaya.

In Korenovsky village he felt unwell. Prokhor spent half a day looking for a doctor and at last succeeded in finding some half-drunk military surgeon and with some difficulty persuaded him to come to the hut. Without removing his greatcoat the doctor examined

Grigory, felt his pulse, and confidently declared: "Relapsing typhus. I advise you, Captain, to cut short your journey; otherwise you'll die on the road."

"To wait for the Reds?" Grigory smiled wryly.

"Well, we must assume that the Reds are still some distance off."

"But they'll be near."

"I don't doubt that. But it would be better for you to remain. I would choose that as the lesser of the two evils."

"No, I'll go on somehow," Grigory said resolutely, and put on his tunic. "You'll give me some medicine, won't you?"

"Go on if you like; it's your affair. I was bound to give you my advice, but after that you can do as you please. As for medicine, the best thing would be rest and attention. I could give you a prescription, but the chemist has evacuated and I've got nothing but chloroform, iodine, and surgical spirit."

"Well, give me some spirit, then!"

"With pleasure. You'll die on the road in any case, so the liquor won't make any difference. Send your orderly with me, and I'll let you have a thousand grammes; I'm good-natured...." The doctor saluted, and went out with an uncertain stride.

Prokhor brought the liquor, got hold of a battered two-horse wagonette from somewhere or other, harnessed up the horses, and reported with grim irony as he entered the room: "The carriage waits, Your Excellency!"

And once more the dreary days dragged on from one to another.

In the Kuban a hurried southern spring was coming from the foot-hills of the Caucasus. The snow in the steppe suddenly melted, laying bare thawed patches of shining black earth; the streams chattered with silvery voices, the road was speckled with snow-puddles, the far azure distances had a spring-like gleam, and the spacious Kuban sky was deeper, bluer, warmer.

Within a couple of days the winter wheat lay bare under the sun; a white mist arose over the ploughed lands. The horses squelched along the miry road and sank over their fetlocks in the mud, getting stranded in the ruts, straining their backs, steaming with sweat. Prokhor thoughtfully tied up their tails and often climbed out of the wagonette and walked alongside, dragging his feet out of the mud and muttering: "This stuff is tar, not mud, God's truth it is! The horses have to sweat all the way!"

Grigory was silent, lying in the wagonette, shivering and wrapping himself up. But Prokhor found the journey tedious without someone to talk to. He would touch Grigory's foot or sleeve and say: "This mud here is the limit! Get out and try it! You're a fine one, getting ill."

"Go to the devil!" Grigory whispered almost inaudibly.

Whenever they fell in with someone, Prokhor would ask: "Is the mud any worse farther on or just the same?"

The answer would come with a laugh and a joke, and Prokhor, glad to have been able to exchange a word or two with a living man, would walk on for

a time in silence, frequently halting the horses and wiping the great beads of sweat from his brown forehead. From time to time they were overtaken by horsemen, and Prokhor felt that he must halt them to exchange greetings and learn where they were from and where they were going. He always ended by saying:

"You're wasting time by going on.... You can't ride at all farther on. Why not? Why, because the mud's so thick there, I'm told by people coming from those parts, that it comes up to the horses' bellies, wagon-wheels won't turn, and shorter folk on foot just fall over and drown on the very road. A dock-tailed bitch may lie, but I don't! Why are we going on? We can't do anything else; I'm taking along a sick bishop, and of course he and the Reds couldn't live together...."

The majority of the horsemen swore cheerfully at Prokhor and rode on. But others stopped to stare hard at him and make some insulting remark, such as: "So the fools are retreating from the Don too? Is everybody in your district like you?"

One Kuban Cossack, who had got separated from his party, grew seriously annoyed with Prokhor for holding him back with such nonsensical talk. He was about to bring his whip down across Prokhor's face, but with extraordinary agility Prokhor jumped on to the wagonette, snatched his carbine from under the horse-cloth, and laid it across his knees. The Kuban Cossack rode off swearing violently, while, roaring with laughter, Prokhor bawled after him:

"This isn't like Tsaritsin, where you could hide in the maize! You block, you sleeveless ninny! Hey, come back, you hominy porridge! Tuck up your overalls or you'll be dragging them in the mud! Taken to wing, chicken-killer? You female ham! I haven't got a dirty cartridge or I'd send it to you! Drop your whip, do you hear?"

Prokhor was half silly with boredom and inactivity, and he found his own way of amusing himself.

From the first day of his illness Grigory lived as though in a dream. He lost consciousness at times, then came to again. At one such moment, when he had recovered his senses after long oblivion, Prokhor bent over him.

"Are you still alive?" he asked, gazing commiseratingly into Grigory's filmy eyes.

The sun was glittering above them. Now crowding together, now stretching out into a broken, velvety black line, flocks of dark-winged barnacle geese flew crying across the deep blue of the sky. The warmed earth with its first flush of young grass gave off a stupefying scent. Breathing rapidly, Grigory avidly drew the invigorating spring air into his lungs. Prokhor's voice only faintly reached his ears, and everything around him seemed unreal, incredibly diminished, distant. Behind them, muffled by distance, gunshots thundered hollowly. Somewhere not far away iron-rimmed wagon-wheels rattled in steady harmony; horses snorted and neighed, human voices were to be heard. He caught the pungent scent of baked bread, of hay, of horses' sweat. It all came to Grigory's consciousness as though from another world. Exerting all

his will he listened to Prokhor's voice, and with the greatest effort realized that his orderly was asking him:

"Would you like a drink of milk?"

Hardly moving his tongue, Grigory licked his parched lips, feeling that a thick cold fluid with a familiar fresh taste was being poured into his mouth. After several sips he clenched his teeth. Prokhor stoppered the flask and bent over Grigory again; and by the movement of Prokhor's weather-beaten lips Grigory guessed rather than heard the question he asked.

"Don't you think I ought to leave you at this village? It's hard going for you, isn't it?"

A look of suffering and anxiety appeared on Grigory's face; once more he summoned all his will and whispered:

"Carry me on—until I die. . . ."

From Prokhor's face he realized that he had been heard and, reassured, he closed his eyes, accepting unconsciousness as a relief, sinking into the thick darkness of oblivion, withdrawing from the tumultuous, noisy world. . . .

XXVIII

All the way to the village of Abinskaya Grigory remembered only one thing: one pitch-dark night he was awakened by the sharp, penetrating cold. Wagons were moving several abreast along the road. Judging by the voices, by the incessant, muffled clatter of the wheels, the train of wagons was enormous. The

wagon in which he was riding was somewhere in the middle. The horses were moving at a walking pace. Prokhor clicked his tongue and occasionally called hoarsely: "Gidi-yup!" and waved his knout. Grigory heard the fine whistle of the leather knout, felt the horses pull more strongly on the traces, making the single-trees rattle, and the wagon rolled along more swiftly, sometimes knocking the end of the centre-pole against the back of the britzka in front.

With an effort Grigory pulled the ends of the sheepskin around himself and turned over on his back. Across the black sky the wind was driving massive, rolling clouds southward. Very rarely a single star flared for a moment like a yellow spark through a tiny gap in the clouds, then the impenetrable darkness once more enveloped the steppe, the wind whistled mournfully in the telegraph wires, and a fine, beady rain sprinkled down.

A column of cavalry was moving along the right-hand side of the road. Grigory caught the long-familiar rhythmic jingle of tightly braced Cossack equipment, the muffled and rhythmical squelch of innumerable hoofs in the mud. No less than two squadrons had passed but the squelch of hoofs still sounded: a regiment must be riding by at the side of the road. Suddenly, in front, the valiant voice of a solo singer flew up like a bird over the silent steppe:

*O, down by the river, brothers, down by
Kamyshinka,
On the glorious steppe, the boundless steppe of
Saratov....*

Many hundreds of voices took up the ancient Cossack song, and high above all danced a tenor accompaniment of astonishing power and beauty. Covering the basses as they died away, the ringing tenor still fluttered somewhere in the darkness, clutching at the heart. But the soloist was already beginning the next verse:

*There the Cossacks lived and spent their lives
as men of freedom,
All the Don, the Greben, and the Yaik
Cossacks....*

Inside Grigory something seemed to snap. A sudden spasm of tears shook his body; his throat tightened with sorrow. Choking back his tears, he waited hungrily for the solo singer to begin and, when he did, soundlessly whispered after him words he had known since childhood:

*And their ataman was Yermak, son of Timofei,
While their captain was Astashka,
son of Lavrenty....*

The moment the solo singer struck up the first words of the song the Cossacks travelling in the wagons ceased talking, the drivers stopped urging on their horses, and the whole train of thousands of wagons moved along in a profound and sensitive silence. Only the clatter of the wheels and the squelch of hoofs kneading the mud could be heard as the soloist, carefully enunciating the syllables, sang the first words of each verse. An ancient song which had outlived the ages lived and ruled over the sombre

steppe. In artless, simple words it told of the Cossacks' free ancestors who at one time had fearlessly shattered the tsarist troops, who had sailed the Don and the Volga in their light pirate craft, pillaging the tsarist ships, "squeezing" the merchants, the nobles, and the governors; the Cossacks who had humbled distant Siberia. And now the descendants of these free Cossacks, shamefully retreating after being defeated in an inglorious war against the people of Russia, listened to the mighty song in a gloomy silence.

The regiment passed on. Overtaking the wagons, the singers rode far ahead of the refugees. But for long afterwards the wagons rolled on in an enchanted silence, and no talk came from them, nor shout at the weary horses. But out of the darkness the song floated back from afar and spread broadly, like the Don in flood:

*... A single thought was in all their minds:
The summer will pass, the warmth of summer,
And winter will come, brothers, the winter cold.
How and where, brothers, shall we spend that
winter?*

*To move on to the Yaik is a long, long march,
And if we roam the Volga, all will think us
thieves;*

*If on to Kazan city we go, there stands the tsar;
The terrible tsar, Ivan Vasilyevich....*

Now the singers were no longer to be heard, but the solo voice still rang out, swelling and dying, then rising again. All listened to it in the same tense and moody silence.

And also, as though in a dream, Grigory remembered coming to his senses in a warm room. Without opening his eyes, he felt in every limb the pleasant freshness of clean bed-linen; the pungent smell of medicines tickled his nose. At first he thought he was in a hospital; but from the next room came a burst of unrestrainable masculine laughter, the clatter of dishes, and drunken voices. A familiar bass voice said: "... And you're a clever one! You should have found out where our regiment was, we'd have helped. Well, drink up! What the devil are you blubbering for?"

Prokhor answered in a tearful, drunken voice: "By God, how was I to know? Do you think I found it easy nursing him? I fed him with sips, had to chew the food for him, as though he was a little baby, and gave him milk to drink, by the true Christ! I chewed bread and pushed it into his mouth, by God I did! I opened his teeth with the point of my sabre. And one time I began to pour milk down his throat and he choked and all but died.... Just think of it...."

"Did you give him a bath yesterday?"

"I gave him a bath and ran the clippers over his hair and spent all I had on milk.... Not that I regret it, I don't care a damn for that. But to chew his food and feed him by hand! Do you think that's easy? Don't say it was, or I'll strike you, for all your rank."

Prokhor, Kharlampy Yermakov, and Pyotr Bogatiryov, his grey lambskin cap thrust on the back of his head, his face as red as a beet, also Platon Ryabchikov, and two other strange Cossacks, came into Grigory's room.

"He's awake!" Yermakov gave a mad shout, making with uncertain steps towards Grigory.

Shaking a bottle and weeping, the expansive Platon Ryabchikov bawled: "Grisha! Dear old lad! Do you remember how we made merry along the Chir? And how we fought! Where has our glory gone? What are the generals making of us and what have they done with our army? Curse them! Alive again, eh? Here, drink, you'll feel better at once. It's pure liquor!"

"So we've found you after all!" Yermakov muttered, his black, oily eyes glittering joyously. He dropped heavily on Grigory's bed, making it sag under his weight.

"Where are we?" Grigory asked faintly, raising his eyes with difficulty to look at the Cossacks' familiar faces.

"We've seized Yekaterinodar now! We'll be retreating even farther soon. Drink, Grigory Panteleyevich, our old pal! Get up, for God's sake! I can't bear to see you lying there!" Ryabchikov fell on Grigory's feet. But Bogatiryov, who was smiling silently and seemed to be more sober than the others, seized him by his belt, lifted him lightly and laid him carefully on the floor.

"Take the bottle from him! He'll spill it all!" Yermakov exclaimed in alarm. With a broad, drunken grin, turning to Grigory he said: "Do you know why we're drinking? We were feeling down in the mouth, then we got a chance of having a fling at somebody else's expense; we looted a wine warehouse, so it wouldn't fall into the Reds' hands. And the stuff we

found! You wouldn't believe it...! We fired at a cistern with a rifle and made a hole in it, and liquor poured out like water out of a tap. We riddled the cistern with bullets, and each man stood by a hole, putting caps, pails, and flasks under it, while others caught it straight in their palms and drank on the spot. We cut down the two Volunteers guarding the warehouse and got to the stuff, and then the fun began. I saw one Cossack climb on top of the cistern, he wanted to draw out liquor through the top with a horse-bucket. But he fell in and was drowned. The floor was a concrete one, the liquor poured all over it up to our knees, and the Cossacks went wading about in it, bending down and drinking like horses in a stream, from right under their feet. And they were falling down on the spot... It was terrible but you had to laugh. There'll be more than one drink himself to death! And we did ourselves proud there too! We don't need much: we rolled out a barrel holding a good five bucketfuls, and that's enough for us. Drink your fill, my soul! Our gentle Don has had its day anyhow. Platon nearly got drowned. They knocked him over and trampled on him. He swallowed a couple of mouthfuls and was ready to snuff out. I could hardly drag him away."

All of them smelt strongly of liquor, onion, and tobacco. Grigory was overcome by a slight feeling of nausea and dizziness. Smiling a weak, exhausted smile, he closed his eyes.

He lay a week in Yekaterinodar, in a house belonging to a doctor, acquaintance of Bogatiryov's, slowly recovering after his illness. Then, as Prokhor put it,

he "began to mend," and at the village of Abinskaya he sat a horse for the first time since the retreat had started.

Novorossiisk was being evacuated. Steamers were transporting the Russian money-bags, landowners, generals' families, and influential politicians into Turkey. The ships were being loaded day and night at all the quays. Cadets were working in gangs as stevedores, filling the steamers' holds with military equipment and the trunks and boxes of the refugee notables.

The forces of the Volunteer Army outstripped the Don and Kuban Cossacks in the route and were the first to arrive at Novorossiisk. They crowded on to the transport vessels. The staff of the Volunteer Army prudently betook themselves to the British dreadnought *The Emperor of India*, which had anchored in the bay. Fighting was going on close to Tonnelnaya. Tens of thousands of refugees thronged the streets of the town. Military forces continued to arrive. There was an indescribable press of people at the quays. Abandoned horses wandered in droves of thousands over the lime slopes of the hills surrounding Novorossiisk. The streets around the harbour were piled high with abandoned Cossack saddles, equipment, and military stores. Rumours spread through the town that only units of the Volunteer Army were to be taken on board the vessels, while the Don and Kuban Cossacks would have to proceed by forced marches to Georgia.

On the morning of March 25, 1920, Grigory and Platon Ryabchikov went to the quay to find out

whether the forces of the Second Don Corps would be embarked. The previous evening the rumour had spread among the Cossacks that General Denikin had issued an order that all Don Cossacks who had retained their equipment and horses were to be transported to the Crimea.

The quay was a solid mass of Kalmyks from the Sal Region. They had driven their herds of horses and camels from Manych and Sal and had brought even their wooden huts as far as the sea. Their nostrils full of the stench of sheepfat, Grigory and Ryabchikov pushed through the crowd to the gangway of a large transport steamer moored alongside the quay. The gangways were guarded by a reinforced guard of officers from the Markov Division. Don Cossack artillerymen were crowded close by, awaiting embarkation. The stern of the vessel was cluttered with guns under khaki tarpaulins. Elbowing his way through the crowd, Grigory asked a smart-looking black-moustached sergeant:

"What battery's this, friend?"

The sergeant gave Grigory a sidelong look and reluctantly answered:

"The 36th."

"Under Kargin?"

"Yes."

"Who's in charge of the embarkation?"

"There he is, by the rail. Some colonel or other."

Ryabchikov pulled Grigory's sleeve and said angrily: "Let's get away from here, they can go to the devil! Do you think you'll get any sense out of this

lot? They needed us when we were fighting, but they've got no use for us now. . . ."

The sergeant smiled, and winked at the artillerymen drawn up in line. "You're lucky, men! They're even turning down the officers!"

The colonel in charge of embarkation operations stepped nimbly down the gangway; after him hurried a bald-headed official, his expensive fur coat unbuttoned. The man pressed his sealskin cap imploringly to his chest and made some remark. There was such a beseeching expression on his sweaty face and in his shortsighted eyes that the colonel turned away and shouted roughly: "I've already told you once! Don't pester me or I'll give orders for you to be put ashore. You're out of your mind! Where the devil can we put your rubbish? Are you blind? You can see what's happening. Oh, go away! For God's sake go and complain to General Denikin himself if you like! I've said I can't . . . and I can't! Don't you understand Russian?"

Turning to rid himself of the importunate official, the colonel tried to pass Grigory. Grigory barred his way and, putting his hand to the peak of his cap, agitatedly asked: "Can officers count on being embarked?"

"Not on this vessel. There's no room."

"What boat is there then?"

"You'll find out at the evacuation point."

"We've been there, but they don't know anything."

"Well, I don't know either. Let me pass!"

"But you're embarking the 36th Battery. Why isn't there room for us?"

"Let me pass, I tell you! I'm not an information bureau!" The colonel tried to push Grigory gently aside, but Grigory had planted his feet firmly apart. Bluish sparks flamed up and died away again in his eyes.

"So you don't need us now? But you did before, didn't you? Take your hand away: you won't shift me!"

The colonel gazed into Grigory's eyes and looked round; the Markov men standing with crossed rifles at the gangway could hardly restrain the surging crowd. Staring past Grigory, the colonel asked wearily:

"What is your regiment?"

"I'm from the 19th Don Regiment; the others are from various regiments."

"How many of you are there all together?"

"Ten."

"I can't. There's no room."

Ryabchikov saw Grigory's nostrils quivering as he said in a low voice. "What game are you playing, you cur? You rear louse! Let us pass at once, or..."

"Grisha will cut him down in a minute!" Ryabchikov thought with angry satisfaction. But, seeing two Markov men forcing their way through the crowd with their rifle-butts to rescue the colonel, he touched Grigory's sleeve: "Don't get mixed up with him, Grigory. Come on..."

"You're an idiot! And you shall answer for your conduct!" the colonel said, his face going white. Turning to the Markov men, he pointed to Grigory.

"Gentlemen! Calm this epileptic! You must establish order here! I've got urgent business with the

commandant, and here I've got to stand listening to all kinds of pleasantries...." He hurriedly slipped past Grigory.

A tall Markov man with neatly trimmed moustaches, wearing lieutenant's shoulder-straps on his dark blue tunic, came up to Grigory and demanded:

"What do you want? Why are you violating discipline?"

"A place on the steamer—that's what I want."

"Where is your regiment?"

"I don't know."

"Show me your documents."

The second man, a young, puffy-faced youngster in pince-nez, said in a youthfully unsteady bass: "We had better take him to the guardroom. Don't waste time, Vysotsky."

The lieutenant carefully read Grigory's document, and returned it.

"You must find your regiment. I advise you to clear out of here and not to interfere with the embarkation. We have been ordered to arrest anyone, irrespective of rank, who violates discipline or interferes with the embarkation." The lieutenant pursed his lips and, giving Ryabchikov a sidelong glance, bent to Grigory's ear and whispered: "I would advise you to have a talk with the commander of the 36th Battery. Stand in their ranks and you'll get aboard."

Ryabchikov, who had heard the lieutenant's whisper, said in a cheerful voice:

"You go to Kargin's, and I'll run and fetch the lads. What else shall I bring besides your kitbag?"

"We'll go together," Grigory said unconcernedly.

On the way back they met a Cossack acquaintance from Semyonovsky village. He was driving a huge wagon-load of baked bread, covered by a tarpaulin, to the quay. Ryabchikov called to the man: "Hullo, Fyodor! Where are you off to?"

"Ah, Platon, and Grigory Panteleyevich! Greetings! I'm supplying my regiment with bread for the road. We've had a hard time baking it, but otherwise we'd have only porridge to eat all the way."

Grigory went up to the wagon and asked: "Are your loaves all weighed, or are they counted?"

"Who the devil's counted them? Why, do you want some bread?"

"Yes."

"Take some then."

"How much can I have?"

"As much as you can carry; there's plenty here."

Ryabchikov watched in amazement as Grigory took loaf after loaf and, unable to restrain his curiosity, asked at last: "What the hell are you taking so much for?"

"I need it," Grigory answered curtly.

He asked the driver for two sacks, put the bread into them, thanked him for his kindness, and, after saying good-bye, ordered Ryabchikov:

"Pick one up; we'll carry them back."

"You aren't intending to spend the winter here, are you?" Ryabchikov asked humorously as he tumbled the sack across his shoulder.

"It isn't for me."

"Then who is it for?"

"My horse."

Ryabchikov neatly swung the sack to the ground and asked in bewilderment:

"Are you joking?"

"No, I mean it."

"So you—what have you got in mind, Panteleyevich? Are you intending to remain behind? Is that the idea?"

"You've got it. Pick up the sack and let's go on. My horse has got to be fed; he's already chewed the manger to bits. A horse may still come in useful, you can't serve on foot."

All the way to their quarters Ryabchikov did not utter a word, merely grunting and shifting the sack from shoulder to shoulder. As they went up to the gate he asked: "Will you tell the boys?" Then, without waiting for an answer, he said in an aggrieved tone: "You've got a fine idea into your head! But how about us?"

"That's for you to decide," Grigory answered with affected unconcern. "If they won't take us, if they can't find room for us, well, they needn't! What the hell do we want them for, to cling on to? We'll stay behind. We'll try our luck. Get on; what have you got stuck in the gate for?"

"The way you're talking's enough to stick anyone! Well, this is a fine thing. You've given me a fine clout on the ear, Grisha! Knocked me down with a feather! And there I was thinking: 'What the devil has he asked for all that bread for? Now our lads will find out and get all worked up.'"

"Well, and how about you? Won't you stay?" Grigory inquired.

"What!?" Ryabchikov exclaimed in alarm.

"You think it over!"

"There's nothing to think over. I'm off, while I've got the chance. I'll tag on to the Kargin Battery and clear out."

"You'll regret it!"

"You really think so? I value my head more than that, brother! I've got no desire to have the Reds try their blades on it."

"You ought to think it over, Platon. The way it is now. . . ."

"I know how it is. And I'm going off at once."

"Well, do as you like. I won't try to argue with you . . ." Grigory said irritably, and was the first to stride up the stone steps leading to the porch.

Yermakov, Prokhor, and Bogatiryov were all out. The mistress of the house, an elderly, hunchbacked Armenian woman, told them the Cossacks had gone off saying they would be back soon. Grigory cut up a loaf of bread into great chunks and went out to the horses in the stable. He divided the bread into two portions and gave half to his own and half to Prokhor's horse. He had just picked up the bucket to bring some water when Ryabchikov appeared at the stable door. In the folds of his greatcoat Platon was carefully carrying bread broken into large pieces. Scenting its master, his horse gave a brief snort. Ryabchikov silently passed the quietly smiling Grigory and, without looking up, said as he tossed the pieces of bread into the manger:

"Don't grin like that! The way things are going I've got to feed my horse too. Do you think I'd be

glad to clear out? I'd have to take myself by my own collar and run myself to that damned steamer! I wouldn't get there any other way. It's living fear that's driving me on.... I've only got one head on my shoulders, haven't I? God grant I don't get it lopped off; a second wouldn't grow in time for Michaelmas!"

Prokhor and the others did not return until late in the afternoon. Yermakov was carrying a huge bottle of liquor, while Prokhor had a kitbag full of sealed flasks containing a thick yellow liquid.

"We've done a fine day's work! Enough to last all night!" Yermakov boasted as he pointed to the bottle. He went on to explain: "We came across a military doctor who asked us to help him carry medical goods from a warehouse to the quay. The stevedores had refused to work, and there were only cadets dragging things from the warehouses, so we teamed up with them. The doctor paid us for our help with liquor, and Prokhor pinched these flasks into the bargain! God strike me if I'm joking!"

"But what's in them?" Ryabchikov asked inquisitively.

"That's purer than liquor, brother!" Prokhor shook up the flasks and held them to the light, revealing a thick fluid bubbling inside the dark glass, and ended in a self-satisfied tone: "That's a rare foreign wine, that is. They only give it to the sick—so one of those cadet bastards who knows English told me. We'll get on board the steamer, drink in our misery, strike up *My Dear Beloved Country*, and drink all the way to the Crimea. And we'll throw the flasks into the sea."

"Hurry up and get aboard, they're holding up the steamer for you and can't get away. 'Where's Prokhor Zykov, the hero of heroes?' they're saying. 'We can't sail without him!'" Ryabchikov said with a sneer. Pointing a yellow, smoke-stained finger at Grigory, he added: "He's changed his mind about going. And so have I."

"You don't say!" Prokhor groaned, almost dropping a flask in his amazement.

"What's all this? What have you got into your head now?" Yermakov asked, frowning and staring fixedly at Grigory.

"We've decided not to go."

"Why?"

"Because there isn't any room for us."

"If there isn't today, there will be tomorrow," Bogatiryov said confidently.

"Have you been to the quay?"

"Well, what about it?"

"Have you seen what's happening there?"

"Well, yes."

"Well, well"! If you've seen, what is there to explain? They would only take me and Ryabchikov, and then a Volunteer told us we were to fall in with the Kargin Battery, otherwise it wouldn't be possible."

"It hasn't embarked yet, has it—the battery, I mean?" Bogatiryov asked quickly. Learning that the men of the battery were standing in line awaiting embarkation, he at once made ready to go. He packed his linen, his spare *sharovari* and a tunic in his kit-bag, added some bread, and said good-bye all round.

"Stay with us, Pyotr!" Yermakov advised him. "There's no point in breaking up the party."

Without answering, Bogatiryov held out his hand, bowed once more at the door, and said: "Keep well! If it's God's will we shall meet again." Then he ran out.

After his departure there was a long, unpleasant silence in the room. Yermakov went into the kitchen to see the mistress, brought back four glasses, silently filled them with liquor, set a great copper tea-pot filled with cold water on the table, cut up bacon-fat and, still not saying a word, sat down at the table, rested his elbows on it, stared dully at his feet for several minutes, drank some water straight from the tea-pot spout, and asked hoarsely:

"Why does the water always stink of paraffin in the Kuban?"

Nobody answered. Ryabchikov wiped the steamy blade of his sabre with a clean rag, Grigory rummaged in his bag, Prokhor gazed abstractedly out of the window at the bare slopes of the hills sprinkled with droves of horses.

"Sit down at the table and let's drink." Without waiting for the others, Yermakov flung half a glass of liquor down his throat and took a drink of water. Chewing a strip of bacon and looking at Grigory with more cheerful eyes, he asked:

"I suppose the Red comrades won't make mince-meat of us?"

"They won't kill all of us. More than a thousand men will be left behind here," Grigory answered.

"I'm not worrying about all of us!" Yermakov laughed. "I'm thinking of my own skin."

When they had drunk plentifully, the conversation took a more cheerful turn. But a little later Bogatiryov unexpectedly returned, frowning and sullen, his face blue with cold. He flung down a whole bale of new-looking English greatcoats at the door and silently began to pull off his coat.

"Welcome back!" Prokhor said sarcastically, with a bow.

Bogatiryov shot an angry glance at him and said with a sigh: "If every one of these Denikin men and other bastards came to me on bended knees I wouldn't go! I stood in the queue, got frozen stiff, and all for nothing. They stopped short just in front of me. There were two men left in front of me, and they took one and not the other. Half the battery's been left behind. What do you call that?"

"That's the way they deal with the likes of us!" Yermakov burst into a roar of laughter and, splashing the liquid out of the bottle, poured out a full glass for Bogatiryov. "Here, drink to your misery! Or will you wait for them to come and ask you to go?" Look out of the window! That's not General Wrangel coming for you, is it?"

Without answering, Bogatiryov took a pull of the liquor. He was in no mood for jokes. But Yermakov and Ryabchikov, both of them half drunk, regaled the old Armenian woman until she could hold no more, then talked of going out to find an accordion-player somewhere or other.

"You'd better go to the station," Bogatiryov advised

them. "They're opening up the freight cars. There's a whole trainful of uniforms going begging."

"What the devil do we want your uniforms for?" Yermakov shouted. "The greatcoats you've brought along will do for us. They'll strip us of anything extra anyway. Pyotr, you hound, we've decided to go over to the Reds, understand? Are we Cossacks or what? If the Reds allow us to live we'll go and serve them. We're Don Cossacks! Cossacks of the purest blood, without any mixture! Fighting's our job! Do you know how I wield my sabre? Like cutting a cabbage-stump! Stand up and I'll try my hand on you! What, feeling too weak? We don't care who we sabre, so long as we can sabre someone. That's true, isn't it, Melekhov?"

"Shut up!" Grigory answered wearily.

His bloodshot eyes squinting, Yermakov tried to get at his sabre, which was lying on a chest. Bogatiryov good-humouredly pushed him away and pleaded:

"Don't rage too much, Anika the Warrior, or I'll quiet you down at once. Hold your drink! Remember you're an officer!"

"I'll resign my rank together with the shoulder-straps! At the moment I need it just about as much as a pig needs a halter. Don't remind me of it! Shall I cut your shoulder-straps off for you? Pyotr, my sorrow, wait a bit; I'll have them off in a jiffy."

"It's not time for that yet; there's plenty of time yet," Bogatiryov laughed, pushing aside his uncontrollable friend.

They drank till dawn. During the evening other Cossacks turned up, one of them with an accordion.

Yermakov danced the Cossack dance until he dropped. They dragged him aside, and he at once fell asleep on the bare floor, throwing his legs wide apart and flinging his head back awkwardly. The cheerless carousal lasted until morning. "I'm from Kumshat-skaya District," one of the strangers, an elderly Cossack, said, sobbing drunkenly. "We had bullocks so big you couldn't reach their horns. My horses were like lions. And now what have we got left on the farm? Only one mangy bitch. And she'll die soon, there's nothing for her to feed on." A Kuban Cossack in a ragged Circassian coat ordered the accordion-player to strike up a Naurskaya dance and, picturesquely throwing out his arms, glided about the room with such astonishing light-footedness that Gregory felt sure the soles of his boots did not touch the scratched, dirty floor at all.

At midnight one of the Cossacks brought in two tall, narrow-throated, earthenware pitchers from somewhere or other. Half rotting, faded labels were stuck to their sides, their corks were sealed, and massive leaden seals hung from the cherry-red sealing wax. Prokhor held one of the huge pitchers, which contained perhaps a bucketful of liquid, in his hands, painfully moving his lips, trying to read the foreign words on the label. Yermakov, who had woken up, took the pitcher from him, set it down on the floor, and drew his sabre. Before Prokhor had time to gasp he cut through the neck with a slanting stroke of his sabre and shouted: "Bring your glasses!"

The thick, amazingly aromatic and astringent wine was disposed of in a few minutes. Ryabchikov clicked

his tongue again and again in ecstasy and muttered: "That's not wine, it's the blessed Sacrament. That's only to be drunk before your death, and then not by everybody, but only those who've never played cards, never played cards, never sniffed tobacco, never touched women.... It's a drink for bishops, in a word!"

Then Prokhor remembered about the flasks of medicinal wine in his kit-bag, and cried: "Wait, Platon! Don't boast too soon! I've got better wine than that! That's muck compared with the stuff I got from the warehouse—now, this is wine! Incense with honey, and maybe even better! It's not bishop's wine, brother, but, I tell you straight, it's tsar's wine. In the old days the tsars drank it, but now it's fallen to our lot..." he bragged away as he opened one of the flasks.

Ryabchikov, always ready for a drink, swallowed half a glass of the thick fluid in one gulp. He at once turned pale, and his eyes bulged.

"That's not wine, it's carbolic!" he shouted hoarsely. In his fury, spitting the remains from his glass over Prokhor's shirt, he rushed, staggering, into the passage.

"He's lying, the snake! It's English wine. The finest quality! Don't believe him, brothers!" Prokhor bawled, trying to make himself heard above the babble of voices. He tossed off a whole glassful of the liquid and at once turned even paler than Ryabchikov.

"Well, what's it like?" Yermakov asked, dilating his nostrils and gazing into Prokhor's bleary eyes.

"Tsar's wine, eh? Strong? Sweet? Speak up now, you devil, or I'll smash this flask over your head!"

Suffering silently, Prokhor shook his head, hiccuped, jumped to his feet and rushed out after Ryabchikov. Choking with laughter, Yermakov winked conspiratorially at Grigory, and went out into the yard. A minute or so later he came back, laughing so uproariously that he drowned all the other voices in the room.

"What's happened now?" Grigory asked wearily. "What are you neighing for, idiot?"

"Oh, my boy, go and look at the way they're turning their insides out. Do you know what they drank?"

"Well, what?"

"Some English anti-louse lotion."

"You're lying!"

"It's God's truth! When I was at the warehouse I thought it was wine too, but then I asked the doctor: 'What's this stuff, doctor?' 'Medicine,' he said. 'It doesn't happen to be the remedy for all sorrows?' I asked. 'It isn't liquor, is it?' 'God forbid!' he said. 'It's some anti-louse lotion the Allies have sent us. It's for external application; you can't use it on your inside.'"

"Then why didn't you tell them, you fool?" Grigory asked in angry reproach.

"Let the devils clean themselves before surrendering! I don't suppose they'll die." Yermakov wiped the tears from his eyes and added not without a touch of malevolence: "And besides, now they'll drink a little more steadily. You couldn't keep up with them before. Such thirsty souls need a lesson. Well, shall

you and I have a drink or shall we wait a bit? Let's drink to our end!"

Just before daybreak Grigory went out on to the steps, with trembling fingers rolled himself a cigarette, lit it, and stood in the mist with his back against the damp wall.

The house was riotous with drunken shouts, the sobbing tones of the accordion, and furious whistling. The heels of the ardent dancers unwearyingly drummed out a fine tattoo. But from the bay came the low, muffled hoot of a steamer siren; on the quays the human voices blended into a solid roar, broken by loud shouts of command, the neighing of horses, the whistles of engines. Somewhere along the railway line fighting was going on. There was a muffled thunder of guns; in the intervals between the shots the burning rattle of machine-gun fire was faintly audible. Over a pass in the mountains a rocket flare flew high into the heavens, sprinkling light. For a few seconds the humped summits of the mountains gleamed in the green translucent light; then the clammy darkness of the southern spring night covered the hills once more, and the artillery cannonade sounded with even greater intensity, blending into a steady roar of gun-fire.

XXIX

A cold, salty, heavy wind was blowing from the sea. It carried the scent of strange, unknown lands to the shore. But to the Don Cossacks not only the wind, but everything else was strange, unhomelike in that dull and droughty sea-side town. They stood on the quay

in a solid mass, waiting to be embarked. Green foam-ing waves seethed along the shore. A chilly sun peered at the earth through the clouds. British and French destroyers were smoking in the roadstead; a dread-nought reared its grey, menacing bulk above the water. Over it spread a black pall of smoke. An ominous silence hung around the quays. Where the last transport had recently been swinging at her moor-ings officers' saddles, suitcases, clothing, sheepskin coats, chairs upholstered in crimson plush, and other lumber, hurriedly flung from the gangways, were floating.

Early in the morning Grigory rode down to the quay. Giving Prokhor charge of his horse, he spent a long time in the crowd, looking for acquaintances and listening to the disconnected, anxious talk. He saw an elderly retired colonel who had been refused a place on the last steamer shoot himself at the gang-way.

A few minutes previously the colonel, a little, fussy man with a grey scrub on his cheeks, and tears in his baggy eyes, had seized the officer of the guard by the strap of his sword-belt, had miserably whispered something, sniffing and wiping his tobacco-stained moustache and trembling lips with a dirty handker-chief. Then he had suddenly appeared to make up his mind.... A moment later some quick-fingered Cos-sack drew the gleaming Browning from the dead man's warm hand and with his feet rolled the body in its light-grey officer's greatcoat to a pile of boxes. Then the crowd seethed still more furiously around the gangway, the fighting in the queues grew still

more violent, the hoarse voices of the refugees rose in a harsh howl of rage.

When the last steamer drew from the quayside there was a crescendo of women's sobs, hysterical cries, curses. Before the curt bass roar of the ship's siren had had time to die away, a young Kalmyk in a fox-skin cap jumped into the water and swam after the steamer.

"He couldn't wait!" one of the Cossacks sighed.

"That one couldn't afford to get left behind, that's clear," said a Cossack standing close to Grigory. "Must have done the Reds too much harm...."

Clenching his teeth, Grigory stared after the swimming Kalmyk. More and more slowly the swimmer's arms cleaved the air, his shoulders sank lower and lower. His saturated greatcoat was dragging him down. A wave washed his shabby red fox-skin cap off his head and threw it back.

"The damned heathen will drown!" some old man in a long Caucasian coat said commiseratingly.

Grigory turned sharply on his heels and went to his horse. He found Prokhor talking excitedly to Ryabchikov and Bogatiryov, who had just galloped up. Seeing Grigory, Ryabchikov fidgeted in his saddle, impatiently dug his heels into his horse's flanks, and shouted:

"Hurry up, Panteleyevich!" Not waiting for Grigory to reach them he shouted to him: "Let's retreat before it's too late. We've collected a good half-squadron of Cossacks, and we're thinking of making our way to Gelenjik, and then on to Georgia. How do you stand?"

His hands thrust deep into the pockets of his great-coat, silently pushing aside the aimlessly gathering Cossacks, Grigory went up to them.

"Will you come with us or not?" Ryabchikov asked insistently, riding right up to him.

"No, I won't!"

"We've got a Cossack military commander to join in with us. He knows every inch of the road and says he could lead us blindfold all the way to Tiflis. Come on, Grisha! And from there we'll go on to the Turks. What do you say? We've got to save ourselves somehow! We're getting near the end now, but you're like a half-dead fish."

"No, I shan't go," Grigory took the reins from Prokhor's hand and climbed heavily, like an old man, into the saddle. "I won't go! It's no use. And besides, it's a bit late now. . . . Look!"

Ryabchikov looked round and in his despair and rage crushed and tore away the officer's sword-knot on his sabre. Lines of Red Army men were streaming down from the mountains. Machine-guns began to rattle feverishly near a cement works. Armoured trains opened fire on the lines of men. The first shell burst near a windmill.

"Ride to our quarters, lads, and keep close behind me!" Grigory ordered, suddenly cheering up and drawing himself erect again.

But Ryabchikov seized Grigory's horse by the rein and exclaimed in alarm: "Don't go! Let's stay here. . . . You know, death's not so bad when you've got people round you. . . ."

"Ah, you devil, come on! Why talk about death? What are you babbling about?" In his annoyance Grigory was about to add something more, but his voice was drowned by a thunderous roar from the sea. *The Emperor of India* had steamed out of the bay and had sent over a packet of shells from its twelve-inch guns. Covering the steamers sailing out of the bay, it raked the lines of Red and Green Army men streaming down to the outskirts of the town, then shifted its fire to the top of the pass, where the Red batteries had taken up positions. The British shells flew with a heavy, grinding roar over the heads of the Cossacks crowded on the quay.

Pulling tightly on the reins to check his horse as it fell back on its haunches, Bogatiryov shouted through the roar of the firing: "Well, the British cannon use strong language! But they're wasting their fire. It's not doing anything, only making a lot of noise!"

"Let them roar! It's all one to us now." Smiling, Grigory touched up his horse and rode down the street. Their horses prancing in a furious gallop, six cavalry men with drawn sabres rode round a corner and swept towards him. On the chest of the leading rider hung a strip of blood-red ribbon.

PART EIGHT

For two days a warm wind had been blowing from the south.

The last snow had melted off the fields. The foaming spring runnels had ceased their roaring, the gullies and rivulets of the steppe had played themselves out. At dawn on the third day the wind died away and heavy mists descended over the steppe; the clumps of last year's feather-grass were silvered with

moisture; the mounds, ravines, and villages, the spires of the belfries, the arrowing crowns of the pyramid poplars, were all drowned in an impenetrable milky haze. Spring had come to the broad steppes of the Don.

That misty morning, for the first time since her recovery, Aksinya went out into the porch and stood for a long time, intoxicated with the heady sweetness of the fresh spring air. Mastering her nausea and dizziness, she walked as far as the well in the orchard, put down her bucket, and seated herself on the edge of the well.

Altogether different, marvellously fresh and enchanting seemed the world to Aksinya. Her eyes bright with emotion, she gazed about her, fingering the folds of her dress as would a child. The enmisted distance, the apple-trees in the orchard swimming with thaw-water, the wet palings, and the road beyond them with its deep, water-filled ruts—all seemed incredibly beautiful to her; everything was blossoming with heavy yet delicate tints, as though haloed in sunlight.

A scrap of clean sky peering through the haze dazzled her with its chilly azure; the scent of rotting straw and thawed black earth was so familiar and pleasant that she sighed deeply and a smile hovered at the corners of her lips; the artless snatch of song of a skylark reaching her ears from somewhere in the misty steppe awakened an unconscious sadness within her. And it was that snatch of lark song heard far from home that sent Aksinya's heart beating more quickly and wrung two meagre little tears from her eyes.

Unthinkingly rejoicing in the life which had re-

turned to her, she experienced a tremendous desire to touch everything with her hands, to look at everything. She wanted to touch the currant bush which stood blackened with moisture, to press her cheek against the branch of an apple-tree covered with a velvety pale-pink bloom; she wanted to step across the fallen fencing and to walk through the mire, away from all tracks, to where beyond a broad hollow the fields of winter corn glowed a fairy green, merging with the misty distance.

For several days Aksinya lived in the expectation that at any moment Grigory would turn up. But at last she learned from neighbours who called on her host that the war was still going on, and that many Cossacks had sailed from Novorossiisk to the Crimea, while those who had stayed behind had joined the Red Army or had been sent to the mines.

By the end of the week she had firmly made up her mind to go home, and a travelling companion was quickly found for her. One evening a little hunch-backed old man entered the hut without knocking. He bowed, but did not speak, and began to unbutton the muddy English greatcoat, ripped open at the seams, which hung around him like a sack.

"Why, my good man, do you expect to get a roof over your head without even saying a 'Good-evening'?" the master asked, staring at the uninvited guest in astonishment.

The old man nimbly removed his greatcoat, shook it out on the threshold, and carefully hung it on a hook. Then, stroking his short grey beard, he smiled and said:

"Forgive me, for the love of Christ, my dear man, but I've learned my lesson for these times: first take off your things and then ask if you can stay the night; otherwise you won't be let in. These days the people have grown churlish, they aren't pleased to see guests. . . ."

"But where are we to put you? You can see we're crowded out already," the master said more amiably.

"I don't need more room than a dog. I'll curl myself up here by the door and sleep."

"But who are you, Grandad? Did you run from the Soviets?" the mistress asked inquisitively.

"You've hit it: I ran from the Soviets. I ran and ran, and ran all the way to the sea; but now I'm quietly making my way back again. I'm tired of running . . ." the garrulous old fellow answered, squatting down on his heels by the door.

"But who are you, all the same? Where are you from?" the master renewed the examination.

The old man drew a large pair of tailor's scissors out of a pocket, turned them over and over in his hands, and said with the same fixed smile on his lips:

"Here's my passport: it's brought me all the way from Novorossiisk. But my home is a long way off, the other side of Vyeshenskaya District. And that's where I'm off to now, after having had a taste of the salt water in the sea."

"I'm from Vyeshenskaya too, Grandad," Aksinya cried in delight.

"Are you really!" the old man exclaimed. "Well, of all the places to meet a fellow-countrywoman! Though these days even that isn't surprising; we're

like the Jews now, we're scattered over the face of the earth. In the Kuban it was so bad that if you threw a stick at a dog you'd hit a Don Cossack. You came across them everywhere, you couldn't get away from them, and there are even more of them buried in the ground. My dear people, I've seen all sorts of sights during this retreat. You wouldn't believe the misery the people are suffering. Two days ago I was sitting in a station waiting-room, and beside me was a gentlewoman wearing spectacles, and she was staring through her spectacles looking for the lice on her. And they were marching over her in regiments. And there she was, picking them off with her fingers, and her face as sour as though she'd bitten a crab apple. Every time she crushed one poor little louse she frowned still more. She looked so disgusted you'd expect her to double up and be sick. And yet you'll find a stout fellow killing a man and not frowning in the least, nor even turning up his nose. I saw one such dare-devil cut down three Kalmyks, and afterwards he wiped his sabre on his horse's mane, took out a cigarette, lit it, rode up to me and asked: 'What are you staring your eyes out for, granfer? Do you want me to cut you down too?' 'What are you saying, my son?' I said. 'God forbid! If you cut off my head how shall I be able to chew my bread?' He laughed and rode off."

"Say what you like, it's easier for a man who's had the practice to kill another man than to crush a louse. Men have grown cheap during the Revolution," the master remarked sententiously.

"That's true!" the guest confirmed. "Men aren't

cattle, they get used to anything. And so I asked this woman: 'Who might you be? By your face you don't look to be one of the common sort.' She looked at me, her face swimming in tears, and said: 'I'm the wife of Major-General Grechikhin.' 'Well,' I thought, 'with all your major and with all your general, you're as lousy as a mangy cat!' And I said to her: 'Excuse me, Your Excellency, but if you're going to kill off all your creeping insects at that rate you'll be kept busy till the Feast of the Blessed Virgin. And you'll break all your little nails. Crush them all at one blow.' 'But how can I?' she asked. And so I told her: 'Take off your clothes,' I said, 'spread them out on some hard spot, and roll them with a bottle.' And I saw my general's wife get up and run behind the water-tower, and I saw her rolling away at her clothes with a bottle of green glass, and doing it so well that she might have been used to it all her life! I stood admiring her and thinking: 'God has plenty of everything; he's turned the insects loose even on people of noble birth; let them suck their sweet blood, so to speak, and not always be drinking their fill of the toilers' blood. God's not a nobody, He knows His job! Sometimes He grows kind to people and settles matters so fairly that you couldn't think of anything better. . . .'

The tailor rattled away incessantly, but, seeing that the master and mistress were listening to him with the utmost attention, he adroitly hinted that he had many more interesting things to tell, but that he was so famished that he felt sleepy.

After supper, as he was making himself comfortable for the night, he asked Aksinya: "And you,

fellow-countrywoman, are you thinking of making a long stay here as a guest?"

"I'm getting ready to go home, Grandad."

"Well, then you come along with me; it'll be more cheerful for both of us."

Aksinya willingly agreed, and next day, after taking leave of her host and hostess, they left the lonely steppe village of Novo-Mikhailovsky.

They arrived at the village of Milyutinskaya after nightfall on the twelfth day of their journey. At a large, prosperous-looking house they asked permission to stay the night. Next morning Aksinya's companion decided to stay for a week in the village, to rest and heal his feet, which were chafed and bleeding. He was unable to walk any farther. Some tailoring work was found for him in the house, and the old man, who was eager to get back to his trade, nimbly made himself comfortable by the window, took out his scissors and spectacles tied with string, and swiftly began to unpick some clothing.

As he said good-bye to Aksinya the old joker made the sign of the cross over her and unexpectedly shed a tear or two. But he at once brushed them away and said with his usual jocularly:

"Need isn't your own mother, but it makes people kin. . . . Here am I feeling sorry to be leaving you. . . . Well, there's nothing we can do about it; so go on alone, my daughter, your guide has gone lame in all his legs; I expect someone fed him on barley bread somewhere. . . . And besides, for my seventy years I've done a good march with you, too good even. If

you get the chance, tell my old woman that her grey dove is alive and well. He's been pounded in a mortar, but he's still alive, and he's sewing trousers for good people on his way, and he may turn up at home at any time. So you tell her: the old idiot has done retreating and is advancing back homeward; he's just longing to climb up on to the stove again...."

Aksinya spent several more days on the road. At Bokovskaya she found a wagon going her way and rode to Tatarsky. Late in the evening she passed through the wide-open wicket-gate of her yard, glanced at the Melekhov house, and choked with the sob which unexpectedly rose in her throat. In the empty kitchen, which smelt of neglect, she shed all the bitter woman's tears which she had been storing up for so long, then went down to the Don for water, lit the stove, and sat down at the table, letting her hands fall to her knees. Lost in thought, she did not hear the door creak, and she was aroused from her reverie only when Ilyinichna came in and said quietly: "Well, greetings, neighbour! You've been away a long time...."

Aksinya gave her a startled look and rose to her feet.

"But what are you staring at me for? Why don't you speak? You haven't brought bad news, have you?" Ilyinichna came slowly to the table and sat down on the edge of the bench, not shifting her questioning gaze from Aksinya's face.

"Why should I have news...? I simply wasn't expecting you. I was sitting thinking and didn't hear you come in," Aksinya said in embarrassment.

"You've got terribly thin, there's hardly enough of you to keep body and soul together."

"I've had typhus. . . ."

"And our Grigory—how is he? Where did you leave him? Is he still alive?"

Aksinya briefly told all she knew. Ilyinichna heard her out without saying a word and then asked: "When he left you he wasn't ill, was he?"

"No, he wasn't ill."

"And you haven't heard anything of him since?"

"No."

Ilyinichna sighed with relief.

"Well, thank you for your good news. For here in the village all sorts of things are being said about him."

"What things?" Aksinya asked almost inaudibly.

"Oh, it's all nonsense. You can't listen to all the stories going round. . . . Of all our villagers only young Beskhlebnov has come back. He saw Grigory ill in Yekaterinodar, and I don't believe any of the other stories."

"But what do they say, granny?"

"We were told a Cossack of Singin village had said that the Reds had killed Grigory at Novorossiisk. I walked all the way to Singin—there's no holding back a mother's heart—and found the Cossack. He denied every word of it. He said he hadn't seen or heard of Grigory. Then there was another rumour that he'd been put in prison, and that he'd died there of typhus. . . ." Ilyinichna's eyes drooped and she was long silent, examining her gnarled, heavy hands. The old woman's face, her cheeks pendulous with age, were

tranquil, her lips were pressed sternly together; but suddenly a cherry-coloured flush flooded her swarthy cheeks, and her eyelids began to flicker. She looked at Aksinya with dry, feverishly burning eyes and said hoarsely:

"But I don't believe it! It can't be that I've been robbed of my last son. God has no cause to punish me. . . . I've only got a little time left to live now—only a very little time left to live, and my heart's had enough sorrow without that! Grisha's alive! My heart has had no sign, and so my darling's alive!"

Aksinya turned away without speaking.

There was a long silence in the kitchen. Suddenly the wind blew the porch door wide open, and they heard the flood water roaring among the poplars on the farther side of the Don, and the wild geese anxiously calling to one another across the waters.

Aksinya closed the door and went and leaned against the stove.

"Don't grieve over him, granny," she said quietly. "No illness could get a man like him down. He's strong, as strong as iron. Men like him don't die. It was freezing hard when we left but he rode all the way without gloves."

"Did he talk about the children at all?" Ilyinichna asked wearily.

"He mentioned both you and the children. Are they well?"

"They're well, what can harm them? But our Pantelei Prokofyevich died during the retreat. We're left alone. . . ."

Aksinya silently crossed herself; she was amazed at the calm with which the old woman had told of the death of her husband.

Resting her hands on the table, Ilyinichna rose heavily.

"Here I've been sitting with you, and it's already dark in the yard!" she remarked.

"Sit as long as you like, granny."

"Dunya's in the house alone, I ought to go." As she adjusted the kerchief over her head, she looked around the kitchen and knitted her brows. "Your stove's smoking. You should have arranged for someone to come and live here when you went off. Well, good-bye!" As she took hold of the door latch, she said without turning her head: "When you've settled down a bit come over and see us, pay us a visit. And perhaps you'll get news of Grigory and can tell us."

From that day on there was a complete change in the relations between the Melekhovs and Aksinya. Their anxiety for Grigory's life seemed to bring them closer and make them kin.

Next morning Dunya saw Aksinya in the yard, called to her, went up to the fence, and, putting her arms around Aksinya's thin shoulders, smiled at her pleasantly and simply. "Oh, how thin you've got, Aksinya! You're nothing but skin and bone!"

"You'd get thin with such a life!" Aksinya smiled in answer, feeling a pang of jealousy as she noted the girl's rosy face, abloom with mature beauty.

"Did Mother come to see you yesterday?" Dunya asked, for some reason dropping her voice to a whisper.

"Yes."

"I thought she did. Did she ask about Grisha?"

"Yes."

"And she didn't cry at all?"

"No; she's a stout-hearted old woman."

Giving Aksinya a trustful look, Dunya said:

"It would have been better if she had; things would have been easier for her. . . . You know, Aksinya, she's grown so strange since this past winter, she's not at all like she used to be. When she heard about Father I thought her heart would break, and I was terribly frightened. But she didn't let fall a single tear. She only said: 'May he enter the heavenly kingdom! My man has ended his sufferings. . . .' And until nightfall she said nothing to anybody. I tried to talk to her about all sorts of things, but she just waved me off and was silent. The misery I had over her that day! But in the evening, when I'd fetched the cattle, I came in from the yard, and asked her: 'Mother, shall we cook anything for supper?' Then her pain passed and she began to talk. . . ." Dunya sighed and, thoughtfully gazing across Aksinya's shoulder, asked: "Is our Grigory dead? Is it true what people are saying?"

"I don't know, dear."

Dunya gave Aksinya a sidelong, questioning look and sighed still more deeply.

"Mother's nothing but yearning for him! She never speaks of him except as 'my youngest.' And she simply won't have it that he may not be alive still. But you know, Aksinya, if she learns that he's really dead she'll die of sorrow herself. It's all she has left in life now. Grigory's the only hope she can cling to.

Even to the children she's become unwanted, sort of, and she can't give her mind to any work. You just think: in one year there's been four of our family. . . ."

Moved by compassion, Aksinya leaned across the fence, embraced Dunya, and gave her a strong kiss on the cheek.

"Get your mother occupied with something, my dear; don't let her grieve too much."

"What can you occupy her with?" Dunya wiped her eyes with the corner of her kerchief and asked: "You come and see us sometimes and talk to her; that'll make it easier for her. You've got no reason to shun us."

"I'll drop in sometimes. I will, you see!"

"I ought to be going out to the field tomorrow. We've harnessed up with Anikushka's widow, we want to sow a little wheat. Are you thinking of sowing anything for yourself?"

"I'm a fine sower!" Aksinya smiled a cheerless smile. "I've got nothing to sow, and besides, what's the good? I don't need much for myself, I'll manage somehow."

"Any news of your Stepan?"

"No, not a word," Aksinya answered unconcernedly, and said, to her own surprise: "I'm not very anxious about him." The confession slipped from her unexpectedly, and she felt embarrassed. To cover her confusion, she hurriedly added: "Well, good-bye, girl; I must go and tidy up."

Dunya pretended she had not noticed Aksinya's confusion and looked away as she said: "Wait a moment; I just wanted to ask you, wouldn't you give us

a hand with the work? The earth will be dried out; I'm afraid we shan't be able to manage. And there are only two Cossacks left in all the village, and they're lame!"

Aksinya willingly agreed, and Dunya went off to make her preparations.

All day she methodically made ready for the next morning; with the help of Anikushka's widow she sieved the seed, managed to mend the harrow, greased the wagon-wheels, and put the sower in order. In the evening she raked some sieved seed-corn into a kerchief and carried it to the cemetery, sprinkling it over the graves of Pyotr, Natalya, and Darya, so that next day the birds would fly to her relatives' graves. In the simplicity of her heart she believed that the dead would hear the merry twittering of the birds and would rejoice.

Only during the hour before dawn did a stillness fall over the banks of the Don. The water cooed softly in the flooded forest, washing round the pale-green trunks of the poplars, rocking the flooded tops of the oak saplings and the young aspens; bowed by the current, the panicles of the bulrushes rustled in the overflowing lakes; over the flooded fields, along the lonely creeks—where the flood water stood motionless as though enchanted, reflecting the twilight of the starry heaven—the barnacle geese called very quietly, the male teals whistled sleepily, and once or twice the silvery trumpet voices of migrant swans were heard. At times a fish growing fat in the flooded expanse splashed in the darkness and a quivering

wave went rolling far over the scintillating water, and a startled bird cried in warning. Then once more the Don-side lands were wrapped in silence. But with the dawn, just as the chalky spurs of the hills were flushing pink, a ground breeze started up. Heavy and strong it blew against the current. Great seven-foot waves piled high along the river, the water seethed furiously in the forest, and the trees groaned as they swayed. All day the wind roared, only dropping late at night. And this weather lasted for several days.

A lilac haze curtained the steppe. The earth had dried out, the grasses were halted in their growth, fissures ran across the autumn-ploughed fields. The ground was drying more and more with every hour; but in the fields belonging to Tatarsky hardly anyone was to be seen. Only a few aged greybeards were left in the whole village, the Cossacks who had returned from the retreat were frost-bitten and sick or disabled, and only women and youths were at work in the fields. The wind drove the dust about the depopulated village, banged the shutters of the huts, and rummaged among the straw on the roofs of the sheds. "This year we shall be without bread," said the old men. "Only women in the fields, and even so only every third house is sowing. And dead earth won't give birth."

Dunya and the other women had been two days sowing when at sunset Aksinya drove the bullocks down to the pond. At the dam, holding a saddled horse by the rein, was the ten-year-old son of the Obnizovs. The horse was chewing with its lips and sprinkling drops of water from its velvety grey muzzle, while the boy amused himself throwing clumps

of dry clay into the water and watching the rings rippling wider and wider.

"Where are you off to, Vanya?" Aksinya asked.

"I've brought food out to Mother."

"Well, and what news is there in the village?"

"Oh, nothing. Grandad Gerasim caught a fine carp in his net last night. And Fyodor Melnikov has come back from the retreat."

Rising on tiptoe, the lad bridled the horse, took a strand of the mane in his hand, and with impish agility sprang into the saddle. He rode away from the pond as a sensible farmer should, at a walking pace, but when he had got a little way he glanced back at Aksinya and set off at a gallop, and his faded blue shirt billowed out like a balloon behind him.

Aksinya stretched herself out on the dam while the bullocks were drinking and there and then decided to go back to the village. Melnikov was a soldier Cossack, and he ought to have some news of Grigory's fate. When she drove the bullocks back to the camp she said to Dunya: "I'm going off to the village; I'll be back early in the morning."

"On business?"

"Yes."

She returned next morning. As she went up to Dunya, who was harnessing the bullocks, she was unconcernedly swinging a switch; but her brows were knitted and the corners of her lips were folded bitterly.

"Fyodor Melnikov's come home. I went and asked him about Grigory. He doesn't know anything," she

said briefly, and, turning on her heel, went to the sower.

After the sowing Aksinya set to work on her own farm; she sowed water-melons on the melon plot, plastered and whitewashed the house, and covered the roof of the shed as best she could with what straw she had left. The days passed by in work, but her anxiety for Grigory did not abate. She was reluctant to think of Stepan, and for some reason she felt sure he would not return; yet when one or another of the Cossacks came home her first question was always: "You haven't seen my Stepan, have you?" and only then did she try discreetly to ferret out some news of Grigory. Everybody in the village knew of their liaison, and even the scandal-loving women had stopped gossiping about them. But Aksinya was ashamed to disclose her feelings, and only rarely, when some taciturn returned soldier made no mention of Grigory, did she ask, narrowing her eyes and obviously embarrassed: "But you didn't happen to see our neighbour Grigory Panteleyevich, did you? His mother's anxious about him; she's just pining away. . . ."

None of the village Cossacks had seen either Grigory or Stepan after the Don Army's surrender at Novorossiisk. But at the end of June a regimental comrade of Stepan's called in to see Aksinya on his way back to his own village.

"Stepan's gone to the Crimea—it's the truth I'm telling you. I saw him with my own eyes getting on the boat. I didn't get a chance of having a word with him. There was such a crowd they were walking on each other's heads!"

When she asked about Grigory he gave her an evasive answer: "I saw him on the quay; he was wearing shoulder-straps. But I haven't seen him since. They've carried off a lot of officers to Moscow, and who's to know where he is now. . .?"

But a week later Prokhor Zykov turned up at Tatarsky. He was wounded and was brought from Mil-lerovo Station in a wagon. When she heard the news, Aksinya stopped milking the cow, let the calf go to its mother, and, putting on her kerchief as she went, hurried almost at a run to the Zykovs' yard. "At any rate Prokhor will know. He ought to know!" she thought as she went. "But supposing he says Grigory's dead? What shall I do then?" And at every step she slowed down more and more, pressing her hand to her heart, fearful of hearing black news.

Smiling broadly and trying to hide the stump of his left arm behind his back, Prokhor welcomed her in the best room:

"Hullo, comrade-in-arms! Greetings! I'm glad to see you alive. And we were thinking you'd given up the ghost in that little village. Ah, you lay there pretty bad. . . . Well, and how beautiful it makes the likes of you!—typhus, I mean. But see how the Poles have carved me up, damn them!" Prokhor showed the knotted sleeve of his khaki tunic. "When my wife saw it she wept and cried, but I told her: 'Don't bellow like that, you fool; others have their heads chopped off and don't complain.' But an arm's nothing at all! They can always make a wooden one for you. At any rate a wooden arm won't be afraid of the cold, and if it gets cut up it doesn't bleed. The only pity, my

girl, is that I haven't learned to manage with one hand. I can't button up my trousers, that's my trouble! I've travelled all the way home from Kiev with them unbuttoned. It's shameful! So you must excuse me if you notice I'm untidy. Well, come in and sit down; you'll be our guest, won't you? We'll have a chat while my wife's out. I sent her out for vodka, the Antichrist! Here her husband arrives home with one arm torn off, and she hasn't anything to drink his health in! You women are all the same when your husbands are away. I know you all too well, you wet-tailed devils!"

"You might tell me..."

"I know! I'll tell you! He asked me to give you a bow like this." Prokhor jokingly bowed, then looked up lifting his eyebrows in amazement. "Well, that's a fine to-do! What are you crying for, you fool? You women are all twisted of the same yarn! If their man is killed, they cry; if he comes home alive, they still cry. Wipe your eyes, wipe your eyes; what are you snivelling like that for? At Novorossiisk we both joined Comrade Budyonny's cavalry, the Fourteenth Division. Our Grigory Panteleyevich took command of a company—a squadron, I mean. Of course I became his orderly, and we rode to Kiev by forced marches. Well, girl, we gave those Poles a taste! On the way Grigory Panteleyevich said: 'I've killed Germans, I've tried my sword on all sorts of Austrians, and I don't suppose the Poles' skulls are any stronger. I think it'll be easier sabring them than our own Russians, don't you?' And he winked at me and grinned. He changed completely when he joined the

Red Army; he got quite cheerful and as sleek as a gelding. Well, but he and I didn't manage to get along without a family quarrel. . . . One day I rode up to him and said by way of a joke: 'Time we called a halt, Your Excellency, Comrade Melekhov!' He rolled his eyes at me and said: 'You drop that sort of joke or it'll be the worse for you!' That same evening he sent for me about something or other, and the devil himself put it into my head to call him 'Excellency' again. . . . The way he snatched up his Mauser! He went quite white and bared his teeth like a wolf—and he's got a full mouth of teeth, at least a troop of them. I ducked under a horse's belly and got away from him. He all but killed me, the devil!"

"Perhaps he'll come home on leave . . ." Aksinya stammered.

"Don't you think of it!" Prokhor snorted. "He says he's going to serve until he's made up for his past sins. And he'll do it: a fool's task isn't difficult. He led us into the attack close to one small town, and I myself saw him cut down four of their uhlan. The devil's been left-handed ever since he was a child, and so he gave it them from both sides. After the battle Budyonny himself shook hands with him in front of the regiment, and he and the squadron were thanked. That's the sort of kettle he's kicking over—your Panteleyevich!"

Aksinya listened as though dazed. . . . She recovered herself only at the Melekhovs' gate. Dunya was in the porch straining milk; without raising her head she asked: "Have you come for the leaven? I know I promised to bring it along, but I forgot." But, glancing

at Aksinya's eyes, wet with tears, beaming with happiness, she understood all without a word.

Pressing her flaming face to Dunya's shoulder, panting with joy, Aksinya whispered:

"Alive and well.... He's sent his greetings.... Go now! Go and tell Mother!"

II

Of all the Tatarsky Cossacks who had retreated with the Whites, by the summer some thirty men had returned. The majority were old men and elderly Cossack soldiers, and, except for sick and wounded, the Cossacks in the prime of life were still missing. Some of them were in the Red Army; others, members of Wrangel regiments, were biding their time in the Crimea, preparing for a new advance into the Don area.

A good half of those who had gone would remain for ever in strange lands: some had perished of typhus, others had met their death during the final struggles on the Kuban; a number who had been separated from the columns were frozen to death in the steppe beyond Manych, two were taken prisoner by partisans and had vanished without trace. There were many Cossacks missing from Tatarsky. The women spent their days in tense and anxious expectation, and in the evening, when they went to meet their cows coming from the pastures, they stood for a long time, gazing from under their palms. Who knows? Perhaps some belated wayfarer might be coming along the high-road in the lilac evening haze.

Some ragged, lousy, and emaciated but long-awaited master would come home, and at once there would be a joyous, aimless bustle in his house; water was heated for the dirt-blackened soldier; the children vied with one another in waiting on their father and watched his every movement; half crazed with happiness, the housewife ran to lay the table, then rushed to the chest to get out a clean set of her husband's underwear. But, just to spite her, the linen would prove to be unmended, and the housewife's trembling fingers simply could not get the thread through the needle's eye. At that happy moment even the yard dog, which had recognized its master a long way off and had run behind him as far as the threshold, licking his hand, was allowed to come into the house; the children escaped scot-free even if they broke the crockery or spilled milk, and all they did went unpunished. Before the master had had time to change into clean clothes after his bath, the hut was crowded with women. They came to learn the fate of their own dear ones and caught fearfully and greedily at every word the Cossack said. A little later a woman would go out into the yard, pressing her palms to her tear-stained face, and would walk along the lane as though blind, not choosing her road. And then in one of the little homes a new widow would lament over her dead, and the thin voices of weeping children would accompany her. So was it in Tatarsky: the joy which came to one house brought implacable woe to another.

Next morning the master, clean-shaven, looking much younger, rose before dawn, went round the farm, and noted the jobs which needed to be attended

to at once. Immediately after breakfast he set to work. Merrily the plane hissed or the axe tapped somewhere under the eaves of a shed, in the cool, as though announcing that capable, masculine hands, greedy for work, had come home to that yard. But in the house and yard where they had learned of the death of a father and husband, a mute silence reigned. Silent lay the mother prostrated with grief, and around her crowded the orphan children, grown up in a single night.

Whenever Ilyinichna heard that another Cossack had returned she said: "And when will our man come home? Others come back, but there's not a word of ours."

"They're not discharging the young Cossacks; don't you understand, Mother?" Dunya answered her in a vexed tone.

"Not discharging them? What about Tikhon Gerasimov? He's a year younger than Grisha."

"But he's wounded, Mother."

"Wounded—pooh!" Ilyinichna objected. "I saw him outside the smithy yesterday, and he was walking along as though on parade. Wounded men don't go about like that."

"He was wounded, but he's getting better now."

"Well, and hasn't our man been wounded quite a lot? His body is marked all over with scars; don't you think he needs to get better too?"

Dunya did her best to make her mother see that it was no use hoping for Grigory's return yet awhile. But it was no easy task to convince Ilyinichna of anything.

"Be quiet, fool!" she ordered Dunya. "I know as much as you, you're not old enough to teach your mother yet. I say he ought to come home, and that means he will come home. Go away, go away; I don't want to waste my breath on you."

The old woman waited for her son with the utmost impatience and mentioned him at every possible opportunity. Whenever Mishatka was disobedient to her she threatened him: "You wait till your father comes home, you shock-headed monkey! I'll tell him and he'll give it you!" If she happened to see a wagon with new ribs in its sides as it passed the window, she sighed and invariably remarked: "You can see the master of that wagon is home again, but ours looks as though someone had shut him out for good." All her life Ilyinichna had never liked tobacco-smoke, and she had always driven smokers out of the kitchen; but now she changed even in this respect. "Go and ask Prokhor to come along," she often told Dunya. "Let him come and smoke a cigarette, for the house smells of the dead. When Grisha comes back from service, the place will smell as it should when a Cossack lives in it!" Every day she cooked extra food, and after dinner she always set an iron pot full of cabbage soup in the stove. When Dunya asked her why she did it Ilyinichna answered in astonishment: "Why, what else should I do? Our soldier may come home today, and then he can have something hot to eat at once; for while you're heating this and that up he may be going hungry." One day, when Dunya returned home from the melon plot she saw Grigory's old coat and peaked cap with its faded red band hanging on a nail in the

kitchen. She looked at her mother questioningly, and with a guilty, rather pitiful smile Ilyinichna said: "I got them out of the chest, Dunya. You see them as you come in from the yard and it makes things seem more homelike—as though he was back again..."

Dunya grew tired of this endless talk of Grigory. One day she could stand no more and reproached her mother:

"Mother, don't you ever get tired of always talking about one and the same thing? You've made everybody sick with your conversation. All we hear from you is 'Grisha,' 'Grisha.'"

"Why should I grow tired of talking about my own son? You wait till you bear children, and then you'll know..." Ilyinichna answered quietly.

After that she took Grigory's cap and coat out of the kitchen into her room, and for several days she said not a word about him. But not long before the hay-making she said to Dunya: "You may get angry when I talk about Grisha, but how are we going to live without him? Have you ever stopped to think about that, silly? Here is mowing-time coming on, and we've got nobody to sharpen even the hay-rake. Look how everything's gone to rack and ruin, and I can't keep up with it. When the master's away even the chattels weep."

Dunya said nothing. She realized well enough that it was not by any means the farm problems that were troubling her mother, but they served only as an excuse for talking about Grigory and for unburdening her soul. Ilyinichna began to yearn for her son with renewed force, and she could not hide her feelings.

That evening she refused her supper, and when Dunya asked if she were feeling ill, she answered reluctantly: "I've grown old.... And my heart is aching after Grisha.... It's aching so much that nothing pleases me, and it hurts my eyes to look out on the world."

But it was not Grigory who was destined to take charge of the Melekhov yard. Just before the haymowing Misha Koshevoi arrived home from the front. He spent the night with distant relations and called on the Melekhovs next morning. Ilyinichna was cooking when, after politely knocking at the door and receiving no answer, he entered the kitchen, took off his old soldier's cap, and smiled at her.

"Hullo, Aunty Ilyinichna! You weren't expecting me, were you?"

"Good-morning. And who are you to me, that I should be expecting you? Are you first-cousin switch to our wattle fence?" Ilyinichna answered roughly, staring angrily at Koshevoi's hated face.

Not in the least put off by this reception, Misha said: "After all, we were acquaintances."

"And nothing more."

"But that's enough for me to come to see you. I'm not going to live with you."

"That pleasure hasn't come my way yet!" Ilyinichna pronounced, and, taking no more notice of the visitor, returned to her cooking.

Paying no attention to her words, Misha looked around the kitchen and said: "I've called to see you and to find out how you're getting on. We haven't seen each other for a year or more."

"We haven't missed you overmuch," Ilyinichna snorted, furiously shifting the pots about over the coals.

Dunya was tidying up in the best room. Hearing Misha's voice, she turned pale and silently clapped her hands. Seating herself on the bench and not daring to move, she listened to the conversation in the kitchen. Now a deep flush would flame in her face, now her cheeks would grow so pale that little white lines appeared along the narrow ridge of her nose. She heard Misha striding heavily about the kitchen, then sit down on a chair which creaked under him, and strike a match. The scent of cigarette-smoke floated into the best room.

"I hear your old man's died."

"Yes."

"And Grigory?"

Ilyinichna was long silent; then with obvious reluctance she answered: "He's serving with the Reds. He's got the same sort of star on his cap as you have."

"He should have put it on long ago...."

"That's his business."

There was a distinct note of anxiety in Misha's voice as he asked: "And Yevdokia Panteleyevna?"

"She's tidying up. You're too early a visitor; good folk aren't about so soon."

"You can't help being bad sometimes. I wanted to see her and so I came. Why should I pick and choose the time?"

"Oh, Mikhail, don't make me angry with you!"

"How am I making you angry, aunty?"

"Why, by all this."

"But by all what?"

"Why, by the way you're talking."

Dunya heard Misha sigh deeply. She could stand no more; she jumped up, arranged her skirt, and went into the kitchen. Misha was sitting by the window, finishing a cigarette. His skin was yellow, and he was so emaciated that he was almost unrecognizable. His faded eyes lit up and a barely perceptible flush appeared on his cheeks when he saw Dunya. Rising hurriedly, he said hoarsely: "Well, good-morning!"

"Good-morning," Dunya answered almost inaudibly.

"Go and fetch water," Ilyinichna at once ordered, glancing at her daughter.

Misha patiently waited for Dunya to return. Ilyinichna said nothing. He also was silent, but at last he crushed his cigarette end between his fingers and asked: "Why are you so annoyed with me, aunty? Have I put you out, or what?"

Ilyinichna swung round from the stove as though stung.

"How does your conscience let you come here, you shameless eyes!" she said. "You dare to ask me that! You murderer!"

"How am I a murderer?"

"A real murderer! Who killed Pyotr? Didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then. After that what are you? And you come and visit us . . . you sit yourself down as though—" Ilyinichna choked and was silent; but, recovering, she went on: "Am I his mother, or who? How can you dare to look me in the eye?"

Misha turned pale. He had been expecting this talk. Stammering a little in his agitation, he said: "I've got no reason to be ashamed of looking you in the eye. Supposing Pyotr had caught me, what would he have done? Do you think he'd have kissed me on my top-knot? He'd have killed me too. Did we come together on those hills to play kiss-in-the-ring? That's what war's for!"

"And our relative, old Korshunov? Is killing peaceable old men war too?"

"Why, what else?" Misha said in amazement. "Of course it's war! I know those peaceable old men! Those peaceable old men sit at home holding up their trousers, but they do more harm than others at the front. The ones like old gaffer Grishaka worked up the Cossacks against us. It was through them that all this war began! Who started the agitation against us? They did—those peaceable ones. And you call me 'murderer'! In the old days I couldn't even slaughter a lamb or a pig, and I know I couldn't even now. I can't lay my hand on such creatures. Other men can slaughter animals, but I stop my ears and get well away so as not to hear or see it."

"But our relative—"

"You and your relative!" Misha angrily interrupted. "We got as much good from him as milk from a he goat! But he did a lot of harm. I told him to come out of the house, but he didn't; so he got it where he stood. I get angry with them—with such old devils! I can't kill an animal, or at any rate only in anger, but such—excuse my expression—filth as your relative and his kind—I can kill as many of them as

you like! I've got a steady hand for enemies like them, who're of no use in this world."

"It's your hard-heartedness that's made you all skin and bones," Ilyinichna said venomously. "I suppose your conscience is troubling you. . . ."

"I doubt it!" Misha smiled amiably. "My conscience isn't going to trouble me over such rubbish as that old gaffer. I've had the fever; it gave me a thorough shaking-up, or, Mother, I'd—"

"Don't call me 'Mother'!" Ilyinichna flared up. "You call a bitch your mother!"

"Now, don't bitch me!" Misha said thickly, ominously narrowing his eyes. "There's a limit to what I'm prepared to stand from you. But I tell you straight out, aunty! You're not to be angry with me over Pyotr. He got what he was asking for."

"You're a murderer! A murderer! Clear out of here, I can't stand the sight of you!" Ilyinichna declared obdurately.

Misha lit another cigarette and calmly asked: "How about Mitka Korshunov, another relative of yours; isn't he a murderer? And what is your Grigory? You say nothing about your darling son, but he's a real murderer and no mistake!"

"Don't talk nonsense!"

"I gave up talking nonsense long ago. Well, but tell me, what is he? How many of our men has he put out of the way, do you know? That's the point! If you're going to give that name to everybody who's taken part in the war, then we're all murderers. The whole point is who we murder and why," Misha said significantly.

Ilyinichna remained silent, but, seeing that her guest had no intention of departing, she said harshly: "Enough! I haven't got time to talk to you, you'd better go home."

"I've got as many homes as a hare has bedrooms!" Misha laughed, and rose.

As if he could be scared away by such talk and such names! He was not so thin-skinned as to pay any attention to the insulting remarks of a bitter old woman. He knew Dunya loved him, and he cared nothing for anything else, including Ilyinichna.

Next morning he called again, greeted Ilyinichna as though nothing had happened, sat down by the window, and watched Dunya's every movement.

"You're coming to see us a lot!" Ilyinichna flung at him, not returning his greeting.

Dunya flushed and looked at her mother with burning eyes, then lowered her glance, without a word. Misha answered with a smile:

"I don't come to see you, Auntie Ilyinichna; you needn't fear."

"It would be better if you forgot the way to our house altogether."

"Why, where else am I to go?" Misha asked, turning serious. "By the kindness of your relative Mitka I've been left alone in the world, and you can't sit like a wolf all alone in an empty hut. Whether you like it or not, aunty, I shall keep on visiting you," he ended, and seated himself more comfortably, spreading out his legs.

Ilyinichna stared at him fixedly. Truly, he wasn't the kind you could simply put outside the door! All

Misha's stocky figure, the angle at which he held his head, his firmly compressed lips, expressed a bovine obstinacy.

After he had gone, Ilyinichna sent the children out into the yard, then turned to Dunya and said: "See that he doesn't set foot in here any more! Understand?"

Dunya gazed at her mother without blinking. Something common to all the Melekhovs showed for a moment in the furious narrowing of her eyes as she said as though biting off every word: "No! He shall come! You shan't forbid him! He shall come!" Unable to control herself, she covered her face with her apron and ran out into the porch.

Breathing heavily, Ilyinichna sat down by the window and remained there, silently shaking her head, gazing with unseeing eyes far into the steppe, where, silvery under the sun, a selvage of young wormwood divided the earth from the sky.

Early that evening Dunya and her mother, unreconciled and silent, were setting up a fallen fence in the vegetable garden down by the Don. Misha came up. He silently took the spade from Dunya's hands and said: "You're digging the holes too shallow, the next wind will blow your fence down again." And he began to deepen the holes for the posts, then helped to set up the fence, fastened it to the posts, and went off. Next morning he brought two freshly planed rakes and a pitchfork-handle and stood them on end outside the Melekhovs' porch. After greeting Ilyinichna, he asked in a business-like tone: "Are you

thinking of mowing the meadow grass? Other people have already gone across the Don."

Ilyinichna did not answer. Dunya spoke instead.

"We've got nothing to get over the river in. Our boat has been lying in the shed since autumn, and it's all dried out."

"You should have set it down in the water in the spring," Misha said reproachfully. "What about caulking it? You can't manage without a boat."

Dunya looked at her mother humbly and expectantly. Ilyinichna went on silently kneading dough and behaved as though the conversation had nothing to do with her.

"Have you got any tow?" Misha asked, smiling almost imperceptibly.

Dunya went into the store-room and brought back an armful of hemp ends.

Misha put the boat in order by dinner-time, then came into the kitchen.

"Well, I've dragged the boat down to the water; now it can soak. Tie it up to a trunk or someone may go off with it." He again asked: "Well, how about the haying, aunty? Perhaps I could give you a hand. I've got nothing to do just now in any case."

"You ask her," Ilyinichna nodded at Dunya.

"I'm asking the mistress."

"Anyone can see I'm not the mistress here...."

Dunya burst into tears and went into the best room.

"Then I'll have to give a hand," Misha said decisively. "Where are your carpenter's tools? I want to make you a rake, I don't suppose the old ones are much use."

He went off into the shed and, whistling, began to fashion wooden teeth for a rake. Little Mishatka danced around him, imploringly gazing into his eyes, and asked: "Uncle Misha, make me a little rake, I've got nobody to make one for me. Granny doesn't know how to, and Aunty doesn't either. You're the only one who can do it, you're good at making them."

"I'll make you one, namesake, by God I'll make you one. But stand back a bit or a shaving may fly into your eye," Koshevoi told him, laughing and thinking in amazement: "Well, isn't he like his father, the little devil! A real chip off the old block! His eyes and his eyebrows and the same way of curling his lip. . . . Grigory did a good job there!"

He set to work to make a tiny toy rake, but he was unable to finish the job; his lips turned blue, an infuriated yet resigned expression appeared on his yellow face. He stopped whistling, laid down the knife, and wriggled his shoulders as though cold.

"Mikhail Grigorich, namesake, go and fetch me a bit of sacking or something and I'll lie down," he asked Mishatka.

"But what for?" the boy asked inquisitively.

"I want to be ill."

"What for?"

"Oh, the way you stick to people, just like a bur! Why, my time has come to be ill, that's all! Fetch it quick!"

"But how about my rake?"

"I'll finish it later."

A violent shiver racked Misha's body, and his teeth chattered. He stretched himself out on the sacking

Mishatka brought, then took off his cap and covered his face with it.

"Are you being ill already?" Mishatka asked disappointedly.

"Yes, I'm ill now."

"But what are you shivering for?"

"It's the fever shaking me."

"But what are your teeth chattering for?"

With one eye Misha glanced from under the cap at his troublesome little namesake, smiled briefly, and ceased to answer his questions. Mishatka stared at him in alarm and ran into the house.

"Granny, Uncle Misha's laid down in the shed and he's shivering and shivering till he's almost dancing."

Ilyinichna looked out of the window, went to the table, and was silent, turning something over in her mind.

"Why don't you say something, Granny?" Mishatka asked impatiently, tugging at the sleeve of her bodice.

Ilyinichna turned to him and said firmly:

"Little one, take a blanket and carry it out to him, the Antichrist, so that he can cover himself. It's fever that's shaking him, a sort of illness. Can you carry the blanket?" She went across to the window again, gazed out into the yard, and said hurriedly: "Stop, stop! Don't bother, there's no need."

Dunya had covered Koshevoi with her own sheepskin coat and was now bending over him, saying something to him.

After the attack had passed, Misha spent the rest of the day busily preparing for the mowing. He was obviously much weaker. His movements were sluggish

and uncertain, but he finished Mishatka's rake for him.

In the evening Ilyinichna prepared the supper, seated the children at the table, and, without looking at Dunya, told her: "Go and call that—what's his name—to supper."

Misha sat down at the table without crossing himself, his body huddled wearily. His yellow face, marked with dirty sweat, revealed his exhaustion; his hand trembled a little as he lifted the spoon to his lips. He ate little and reluctantly, now and then looking around him indifferently at the others. But Ilyinichna was astonished to notice that the "murderer's" faded eyes grew warm and lit up whenever they rested on little Mishatka; tiny sparks of admiration and fondness momentarily flamed up in them and died away, and a barely perceptible smile lurked at the corners of his lips. Then he shifted his gaze, and a numb indifference again lay like a shadow over his face.

Ilyinichna furtively began to watch Koshevoi. Only then did she realize how terribly thin he had become as the result of his illness. The arches of his collar-bones showed prominently under his dusty grey tunic, his broad shoulders were hunched, and the bones almost protruded through the skin, while his hairy Adam's apple looked absurd in his childishly thin neck. The more Ilyinichna observed the "murderer's" bowed figure and waxen face, the more she felt an inward discomfort, as though she were being torn apart. Suddenly an uninvited pity for this man whom she hated so much—that gripping motherly pity which

subdues even strong women—awoke in Ilyinichna's heart. Unable to master this new feeling, she pushed a plateful of milk across to Misha and said:

"Eat up, for God's sake! You're so thin it makes me sick to look at you. . . . A fine bridegroom you'd make!"

III

The villagers began to talk about Koshevoi and Dunya. Happening to meet Dunya at the landing-stage, one woman asked with an obvious sneer in her voice: "Have you taken on Mikhail as a labourer? He never seems to leave your yard!"

To all her daughter's persuasions Ilyinichna stubbornly replied: "You can ask as much as you like, I won't give you away to him. You'll never have my blessing!" And only when Dunya announced that she would go off to live with Koshevoi and at once began to collect her finery did Ilyinichna change her decision.

"Come to your senses!" she exclaimed in alarm. "What shall I do alone with the children? Are we to perish?"

"You know best, Mother, but I don't want to be the laughing-stock of the village," Dunya said quietly, continuing to throw her maiden finery out of the chest.

Ilyinichna stood silently working her lips, but at last, after a long silence, shifting her feet as though they were heavy, she went to the icon corner.

"Well, so be it, Daughter!" she whispered, taking

down the icon. "If that's what you're thinking, then God help you! Come here. . . ."

With alacrity Dunya dropped to her knees. Ilyinich-na blessed her and added in a quivering voice:

"My dead mother blessed me with this icon. . . . Oh, your father ought to see you now. . . . Do you remember what he said about your groom? God knows how hard it is for me. . . ." Silently turning away, she went out into the porch.

No matter how hard Misha tried, no matter how much he pleaded with Dunya to forego a church marriage, the stubborn girl would not change her mind. So, grinding his teeth, Misha had to agree. Mentally cursing everything in the world, he made ready for the ceremony as though preparing for execution. Father Vissarion did the job quietly in the empty church at night. After the ceremony he congratulated the youthful couple and said in an edifying tone:

"Well, young Soviet comrade, you see how life has its turns; last year you set fire to my house with your own hand, delivered it over to the burning, so to speak, and today I've had the pleasure of officiating at your marriage. As the proverb says: 'Don't spit into the well, you may need to drink from it.' But all the same I'm glad, heartily glad, that you've come round and found your way to Christ's church."

That was the last straw for Misha. Ashamed of his weakness of will and angry with himself, he had said not a word in the church. But now he shot a furious look at the gloating priest and whispered, so that Dunya should not hear:

"Pity you ran away from the village, then, for I'd

have burned you together with your house, you long-maned devil! You get that clear, do you?"

Dumbfounded by the surprise of this attack, the priest stared with blinking eyes at Misha. But the bridegroom, tugging at his young wife's sleeve, said sternly: "Come on!" and with his army boots clattering noisily, made for the door.

At this cheerless wedding there was no drinking of vodka, nor bawling of songs. Prokhor Zykov, who acted as best man, complained about it to Aksinya next day, spitting with disgust again and again.

"Well, girl, it was a fine wedding, I can tell you! In the church Mikhail muttered something to the priest that made the old man's jaw drop! And at supper, do you know what we had? Roast fowl and sour milk. . . . If the devils had only given us a tiny drop of vodka! Grigory Panteleyevich ought to have seen how his sister was married off! He'd have clutched his head! No, girl, I've had enough! I'm not going to any more of these newfangled weddings. A dog's marriage is merrier; the dogs do at least tear one another's hair out, and there's plenty of noise. But here there was neither drinking nor fighting, may the infidels be accursed! You know, I was so upset after the wedding that I couldn't sleep all night. I lay scratching myself as though they'd put a fistful of fleas under my shirt. . . ."

From the day when Koshevoi installed himself in the Melekhov home, everything on the farm took a new turn; in a short time he had mended the fence, and carted in the steppe hay and stacked it on the threshing-floor, neatly thatching the top; in prepara-

tion for the harvest he fitted a new platform and sails to the harvester, diligently cleaned the floor in readiness for the threshing, repaired the old winnow, and mended the harness. For he was secretly dreaming of exchanging the yoke of bullocks for a horse and said more than once to Dunya: "We ought to provide ourselves with a horse. Driving with these yoked apostles is like going to a funeral." One day in the storeroom he discovered a tin of zink white and ultramarine, and at once decided to paint the house shutters, which were grey with age. The Melekhov house seemed to grow young again as it looked out on the world with its windows framed in blue.

Misha proved to be a zealous farmer. Despite his fever he worked without downing tools for a moment. Dunya helped him in everything.

In the first few days of their married life she grew distinctly better-looking and seemed to spread in the shoulders and hips. She had a new expression in her eyes, in her walk, even in the way she tidied her hair. Her former awkward angularity of movement, her childish exuberance and energy, vanished. Smiling and tranquil, she gazed at her husband with loving eyes and saw nothing of what was happening around her. Young happiness has no eyes.

But with every passing day Ilyinichna felt more and more keenly the loneliness which had come upon her. She had grown superfluous in the house in which she had spent almost all her life. Dunya and her husband worked as though they were building their own nest in some new spot. They discussed nothing with her and did not ask her consent when they made some

innovation on the farm; and they did not even find a kindly word to use when speaking to the old woman. When they sat down at the table they would exchange a few insignificant remarks with her; then once more Ilyinichna was left alone with her cheerless thoughts. She gained no joy from her daughter's happiness, and the presence of a strange man in the house—and her son-in-law remained as much a stranger to her as before—oppressed her. Life itself was beginning to be a burden to her. In one year she had lost so many of her dear ones, and she lived on, broken by suffering, grown old and pitiful. Much sorrow had she known in her life, perhaps too much. Now she no longer had the strength to resist it, and she constantly had a superstitious presentiment that death, which had grown so accustomed to visiting her family, would yet cross the threshold of the old Melekhov house more than once. Now she was reconciled to Dunya's marriage she had only one desire: to live to see Grigory's return, to hand the children over to him, and then to close her eyes for ever. During her long and arduous life she had suffered enough to earn her right to repose.

Endlessly the long summer days dragged by. The sun was bright and hot. But the prickling sunlight no longer warmed Ilyinichna. She sat motionless for hours on the steps, in the full sunlight, indifferent to all around her. She was no longer the bustling and zealous housewife she had been. She felt no desire to do anything. It was all for nothing and now seemed unnecessary and unreal; nor did she have the strength to work as in past days. She often examined

her hands, battered with many years of labour, and thought: "Well, my hands have done their work now.... It's time to rest.... I've lived my life, it's enough.... So long as I live to see my Grisha...."

Only once did she recover her former vitality, and then not for long. One day Prokhor dropped in on his way home from Vyeshenskaya, shouting when still some distance off.

"How about treating me, Granny Ilyinichna? I've brought you a letter from your son."

The old woman turned pale. In her mind a letter was inevitably associated with some new misfortune. But when Prokhor read Grigory's brief letter, a good half of it consisting of greetings to his dear ones, and only in the end indicating that he would try to get home on leave in the autumn, for a long time Ilyinichna could not speak for joy. Little tears as tiny as beads rolled down her brown face, down the deep furrows in her cheeks. Hanging her head, she wiped them away with the sleeve of her bodice, and with her rough hand. But they went on rolling down her face and, dropping one by one on her apron, speckled it as though with warm and heavy rain. Prokhor did not merely dislike women's tears, he could not endure them. So, frowning with annoyance, he said:

"You've worked yourself up into a fine state, granny! What a lot of moisture the likes of you women have! You ought to be glad, and not start crying. Well, I'm off. Good-bye! I don't get much joy out of watching you."

Ilyinichna stopped weeping and halted him. "For such good news, my dear—how could I let you go

like that? Wait a bit, and I'll treat you . . ." she muttered incoherently, taking out a bottle she had kept for many a day in the chest.

Prokhor sat down and stroked his moustache.

"Will you have a drink with me, as you're so happy?" he asked. Though he at once thought anxiously: "Well, now the devil's got hold of my tongue again! She'll go and have her share, and there's only enough vodka in the bottle for a smell. . . ."

But Ilyinichna refused. She carefully folded up the letter and laid it on the icon-shelf; but, evidently thinking better of it, she picked it up again, held it in her hands for a moment, then thrust it into her bosom and pressed it firmly against her heart.

When Dunya returned from the fields she read the letter again and again and at last smiled and sighed: "Oh, if only he'd come soon! You're no longer your old self, Mother!"

Ilyinichna jealously took the letter from her, concealed it again at her breast and, smiling, looking at her daughter with beaming, half-closed eyes, said: "Not even the dogs bark at me, I'm so useless these days, but my younger son has remembered his mother! The way he writes! He calls me by my full name too! I bow low to you, dear Mother, he writes, and also to the dear children; and he didn't forget you, Dunya. . . . Well, what are you laughing at? You're a fool, a complete fool!"

"Why, Mother, can't I smile now? But where are you off to?" *

"I'm going to the garden to hoe the potatoes."

"I'll do it myself tomorrow; you should stay at

home. You're always complaining of feeling ill, and now you've suddenly found work to do!"

"No, I'll go. . . . I'm so happy, I'd like to be all alone," Ilyinichna admitted, and youthfully, swiftly, tied her kerchief around her head.

On the way to the garden she called to see Aksinya. For the sake of decency she talked at first of indifferent matters and then took out the letter.

"Our boy's sent me a letter; he's made his mother happy, he promises to come home on leave. Here, neighbour, read it, and I'll listen to it once more."

After that Aksinya often had to read the letter. Ilyinichna would drop in of an evening, and would take out the yellow envelope carefully wrapped in a handkerchief, and ask with a sigh: "Read it, Aksinya dear. Today there's a weight on my heart, and in my sleep I saw him quite small, just as he was when he went to school."

In the course of time the words, written in pencil, began to blur, and many of them could not be distinguished at all. But that made no difference to Aksinya; she had read the letter so often that she knew it by heart. Later still, when the thin paper began falling to pieces, she unhesitatingly told Ilyinichna all the contents of the letter, down to the last line.

A couple of weeks after the arrival of the letter Ilyinichna began to feel ill. Dunya was busy with the threshing, and the old woman did not want to take her off the work, yet she could not manage the cooking herself.

"I shan't get up today. You manage somehow on your own," she asked her daughter.

"Why, where are you feeling bad, Mother?"

Ilyinichna smoothed out the creases in her old bodice and answered without raising her eyes:

"I feel bad all over—just as though everything inside me had been beaten to a pulp.... When I was younger your dead father used to go mad and beat me.... And he'd got cast-iron fists.... I'd lie for a week as though I were dead. And that's just how I feel now: everything inside me seems to be broken, I'm all thrashed...."

"Shall I send Mikhail for the doctor?"

"What do I need him for? I'll get up somehow."

Next day she did get up and went out into the yard; but towards evening she took to her bed again. Her face swelled a little, and bags of water appeared under her eyes. Several times during the night she raised herself on her arms, lifting her head from the piled pillows, breathing fast, suffering from a shortage of breath. Then the choking sensation left her and she could lie quietly on her back and even get out of bed. She passed several days in a state of quiet renunciation and peace. She wanted to be alone, and when Aksinya came to see her, she gave curt answers to her questions and sighed with relief when she went. She was glad that the children spent most of the day in the open air, and that Dunya rarely came in and did not pester her with questions. She no longer had need of any sympathy or solace. A moment had come when she felt an overwhelming need to be left alone, in order to recall much of her life. Half closing her eyes, she lay for hours without stirring, except for her swollen fingers gathering the

folds of the blanket; and during those hours all her life passed before her.

It was amazing how short and poor that life had turned out to be, and how much of it was oppressive and bitter, how much she had no wish to recall. For some reason, her memories and thoughts turned most of all to Grigory. Maybe because she had not known freedom from anxiety for him during all the years since the beginning of the war, and he was the only link binding her to life. Or perhaps her yearning for her elder son and her husband had been numbed, had faded with time, for she recalled them more rarely, and she seemed to see them through a grey misty haze. She was reluctant to recall her youth, her married life. That was all simply unnecessary, it had receded so far into the distance, and now brought neither pleasure nor relief. Returning to the past in her memories, she remained stern and unsullied in thought. But she recalled her "young one" with extreme, almost tangible clarity. And as soon as she began thinking of him, she felt her heart beating faster. Then the choking sensation returned, her face went grey, and she lay a long time unconscious. But as soon as she recovered she thought of him again. She could not forget her last son. . . .

One day she was lying in the best room. The noon-day sun was shining outside. On the southern edge of the sky white clouds, tilted by the wind, were floating majestically in the dazzling blue. The oppressive silence was broken only by the monotonous, sleepy buzzing of the grasshoppers. Outside, just under the window, the grass huddling against the house

foundation—half-faded goosegrass mingled with wild oats and quitch—had not been withered by the sun, and it was here that the grasshoppers had found shelter. Ilyinichna listened to their incessant chirruping, caught the scent of the sun-warmed grass which penetrated into the room, and for a moment she had a vision of the sunscorched August steppe, the golden wheat stubble, and the glowing azure sky enveloped in a dove-grey haze.

She distinctly saw the bullocks pasturing on the wormwood-covered bounds of the fields, the wagon with the canopy stretched over it; she heard the dry buzzing of the grasshoppers, and breathed in the cloying bitter scent of the wormwood.... And she saw herself—young, well-grown, beautiful. There she went, hastening to the encampment. The stubble rustled under her feet and pricked her bare calves, at her back the burning wind dried the sweaty blouse gathered into her skirt, and scorched her neck. Her cheeks were flooded with crimson, the rush of blood to her head caused a fine ringing in her ears. With one bent arm she supported her heavy, straining, milk-filled breasts and, hearing a child's sobbing cry, quickened her steps, unbuttoning the neck of the blouse as she went.

Her weather-beaten lips quivered and smiled as she took the tiny, swarthy Grisha from the cradle hanging under the wagon. Holding the sweaty string of her cross away from her neck with her teeth, she hurriedly gave him the breast, whispering through her clenched teeth: "My darling, my little son! My beautiful one...! Your mother's famished you with

hunger. . . ." Still sobbing offendedly, the little Grisha sucked and bit painfully at the teat with his tiny gums. And beside her stood his young, black-moustached father, whetting a scythe. From under her drooping lashes she saw his smile and the bluish whites of his twinkling eyes. The heat made it difficult for her to breathe, the sweat streamed from her brow and tickled her cheeks, and the light faded, faded before her eyes. . . .

She aroused herself from the dream, passed her hand over her tear-stained face, and then lay still, tormented with a cruel attack of choking, occasionally sinking into a coma.

Late that evening, when Dunya and her husband had gone to sleep, she gathered what remained of her strength, rose, and went into the yard. Aksinya had been out late, looking for her cow which had got separated from the herd, and as she returned home she saw Ilyinichna walking slowly and unsteadily towards the threshing-floor. "What has she gone there for, ill as she is?" Aksinya wondered, and, stealing up to the fence which bounded the Melekhovs' threshing-floor, looked inside. A full moon was shining. A breeze was blowing from the steppe. The stack of straw cast a dense shadow over the bare, stone-rolled floor. Ilyinichna was supporting herself with both hands on the fencing, gazing out into the steppe to where a camp-fire lit by the mowers was glimmering like a distant, inaccessible little star. Aksinya clearly saw the old woman's swollen face lit up by the bluish light of the moon, and the grey strand of hair breaking from under her black shawl.

Ilyinichna stood long gazing into the darkling steppe, then called quietly, as though he were standing quite close to her: "Grisha dear! My darling boy!"

She was silent for a moment, then in a different, low and husky voice she said: "Blood of my blood!"

Aksinya shivered, gripped by an inexplicable feeling of longing and fear. She stepped back sharply from the fence and went to her house.

That night Ilyinichna realized that soon she was to die, that death was already at her bedside. At dawn she took Grigory's shirt out of the chest, rolled it up, and laid it under her pillow. She also made ready her own grave-clothes and the shirt in which she was to be attired after she had drawn her last breath.

Next morning Dunya went in to see her mother as usual. Ilyinichna took Grigory's carefully folded shirt from under the pillow and, without speaking, held it out to Dunya.

"What's this?" Dunya asked in surprise.

"Grisha's shirt. . . . Give it to your husband, let him wear it. His old one must be rotten with sweat," Ilyinichna said very faintly.

Dunya noticed her mother's black skirt, shirt, and fabric slippers lying on the bench—the clothes in which the body is attired when it is sent forth on its long journey—saw them and paled.

"What have you been getting those things ready for, Mother? Take them away, for the sake of Christ! Bless you, it's early yet for you to think of death!"

"No, my time has come. . ." Ilyinichna whispered. "My turn. . . . Look after the children, watch over

them till Grigory returns.... I can see now that I'm not going to live till then.... Oh, I'm not going to live till then...."

So that Dunya should not see her tears, Ilyinichna turned to the wall and covered her face with her kerchief.

She died three days later. Other women of her own age washed her body, attired her in her burial clothes, and laid her out on the table in the best room. In the evening Aksinya came to say farewell to the dead. She had difficulty in recognizing the features of the former proud and brave-hearted Ilyinichna in the stern and beautiful face of this little old woman. As she touched the cold yellow brow with her lips, Aksinya noticed the familiar insubmissive strand of grey hair breaking from under the white kerchief, and the tiny round shell of the ear, just like a young woman's.

With Dunya's consent Aksinya took the children to her house. They were speechless and frightened by this new death. She fed them and took them to bed with her. She had a queer feeling as she embraced these children of the man she loved, the little bodies huddling quietly one on each side of her. Softly she began to tell them fairy-tales remembered from her own childhood, in order to distract them a little, to take their thoughts off their dead grandmother. Quietly, in a sing-song voice, she told them the story of the poor orphan Vanyushka:

*Swan-geese,
Carry me
On your wings so white;*

*Carry me far
To my native land,
To my own dear land. . . .*

Before she had finished the story she heard the children breathing regularly and evenly. Mishatka was lying on the outside, his face pressed hard against her shoulder. With a movement of her shoulder Aksinya made his back-flung little head more comfortable and suddenly felt such a pitiless, rending yearning, that a spasm clutched her throat. She broke into a violent and bitter weeping, shuddering with the sobs which racked her. But she could not even wipe away her tears: Grigory's children were sleeping in her arms, and she did not want to awaken them.

IV

After Ilyinichna's death Koshevoi was left the sole and undisputed master in the house, and it would have been natural for him to turn with still greater ardour to the restoration of the farm, to its further extension. But actually this was far from the case: with every day Misha worked more and more reluctantly. More and more often he would go out and spend the evenings sitting in the porch far into the night, smoking, pondering something. Dunya could not help noticing the change which had occurred in her husband. More than once she was amazed to see that Misha, who formerly had worked with total disregard of self, would suddenly, for no apparent reason, drop the axe or plane and sit down to rest.

The same thing happened in the fields when they sowed the winter rye; he would take a couple of turns up and down the field, then would halt the bullocks, roll himself a cigarette, and sit long on the ploughed land, smoking, knitting his brows.

Dunya, who had inherited her father's practical sagacity, thought anxiously: "He's not lasted long... either he's ailing, or else he's just lazy. I'll only have trouble with such a husband! You might think he was living with strangers: smoking half the day, lolling about the other half, and never any time for work.... I must have a talk with him, in a round-about way, so as not to upset him, otherwise if he goes on working as hard as this we won't be able to shovel need out of the house with a spade...."

So one day Dunya guardedly asked him:

"You're not the man you used to be, Misha; is your fever getting the better of you?"

"Why my fever? It's sickening enough here without fever," Misha answered irritably, touching up the bullocks and setting off behind the sower.

Dunya thought it unwise to continue her questions; after all, it wasn't a woman's place to instruct her husband. And there the matter ended.

She was mistaken in her assumptions. The sole cause hindering Misha from working with his former zeal was the conviction, which grew stronger in him with every day, that he had settled down too soon in his native village. "I've been a little too quick to turn to farming, I was in too much of a hurry..." he thought angrily when he read the war reports in

the regional newspaper or listened of an evening to the stories told by demobilized Red Cossacks. But he was especially disturbed by the attitude of the villagers: certain of them were openly saying that the Soviet Government would be ended by winter, that Wrangel had advanced from Tavria and together with Makhno was already close to Rostov, and that the Allies had landed a great expeditionary force in Novorossiisk. Rumours, each more stupid than its predecessor, spread through the village. The Cossacks who had returned from concentration camps or the mines, and had grown fat on home cooking during the summer, kept themselves to themselves, drank home-made vodka of nights, had their own talks, and when they met Misha, asked with feigned unconcern: "You read the papers, Koshevoi; tell us all about Wrangel, will they put an end to him soon? And is it true or only talk that the Allies are pressing us hard again?"

Late one Sunday afternoon Prokhor Zykov dropped in. Misha had only just returned from the fields and was washing himself, standing close to the porch. Dunya was pouring water out of a pitcher into his hands, gazing with a smile on her lips at her husband's thin, sunburnt neck. Prokhor greeted them and seated himself on the bottom step of the porch, before asking: "I suppose you haven't had any news of Gregory Panteleyevich?"

"No," Dunya answered, "he hasn't written."

"Why, are you so anxious about him?" Misha wiped his face and hands and looked without a smile into Prokhor's eyes.

Prokhor sighed and arranged the empty sleeve of his shirt.

"Of course I am. We served all our time together."

"And you're thinking of doing some more now, are you?"

"More what?"

"Why, service!"

"My days of service with him are over."

"But I thought you might be waiting for him and longing to serve again," Misha went on, still without a smile. "To fight again against the Soviet Government...."

"Well, now you shouldn't talk like that, Mikhail," Prokhor said in an offended tone.

"Why shouldn't I? I hear of all kinds of talk that goes on in the village."

"Have you heard me talking like that? Where have you heard them?"

"Not you, but people like you and Grigory, who're all waiting for 'their people.'"

"I'm not waiting for 'their people'; they're all the same to me."

"That's just the curse of it, that they are all the same to you. Come into the house; don't take offence, I was joking."

Prokhor reluctantly went up the steps, saying as he crossed the threshold: "Your jokes, brother, are not very funny.... The past has got to be forgotten. I've paid for the past."

"Not all the past can be forgotten," Misha said dryly as he sat down at the table. "Stop and have supper with us."

"Thank you. Of course the past can't all be forgotten. For instance I've lost an arm, and I'd be very glad to forget it. But it won't be forgotten: it's always reminding me of itself."

Dunya said as she lay the table, not looking at her husband: "Is it your opinion that anyone who's been with the Whites can never be forgiven?"

"Why, what did you think?"

"Well, I thought that anyone who rakes up the past shall have his eyes put out, so they say."

"You may find that in the Bible," Misha said coldly. "But in my view a man must always answer for his deeds."

"The government says nothing about that," Dunya remarked quietly. She did not wish to wrangle with her husband in the presence of another Cossack, but inwardly she was annoyed with Misha for his, as it seemed to her, misplaced joke with Prokhor and for the enmity he had openly shown to her brother.

"The government says nothing to you; it's got nothing to talk about with you. But service with the Whites has to be answered for under Soviet law."

"And have I got to answer for mine too?" Prokhor asked.

"You're only a sheep; you've had a graze, now back into your pen! There'll be no questioning of orderlies, but Grigory will have to face the music when he turns up. We'll question him about the rising."

"And who'll do the questioning, you?" Dunya's eyes flashed as she set a cup of sour milk down on the table.

"Yes, I'll question him too," Misha calmly answered.

"It's not your business.... There'll be questioners enough without you. He's won his pardon by serving in the Red Army...."

Dunya's voice shook. She sat down at the table, gathering the flounces of her apron in her fingers. As though he had not noticed his wife's agitation, Misha went on unruffled: "I'll find it interesting to do some questioning too.... But so far as his pardon's concerned we'll have to see.... We'll have to reconsider how far he's earned his pardon. He's spilt quite a lot of our blood. We'll have to measure out whose blood weighs the most...."

This was the first difference Misha and Dunya had had since their marriage. There was an awkward silence in the kitchen. Misha silently ate the milk, occasionally wiping his lips with a hand-towel. Prokhor smoked, and gazed at Dunya. Then he began to talk of farming matters. He stayed for another half-hour. As he was going he said: "Kirill Gromov's back. Have you heard?"

"No. Where's he turned up from?"

"From the Reds. He was in the First Cavalry Army too."

"Is he the one that served under Mamontov?"

"That's him."

"He was a fine fighter!" Misha laughed sneeringly.

"Very fine where it was a question of looting. He had a ready hand for that sort of thing."

"They say he sabred prisoners without mercy. Killed them for their boots. Killed them simply to get their boots, and nothing else."

"So they say," Prokhor confirmed.

"And has he got to be pardoned too?" Misha asked softly. "God forgave His enemies and commanded us to do the same, or what?"

"That's not easy to answer. . . . But what can you do with him?"

"Well, I'd do him all right—" Misha screwed up his eyes. "I'd do him so that he'd give up the ghost after it! And he won't escape it, either. There's the Don Cheka at Vyeshenskaya, they'll put their loving arms around him."

Prokhor smiled and said: "It's a true saying that only the grave can straighten the hunchback. He's come back with loot even from the Red Army. His wife was boasting to mine that he's brought her home a woman's coat, I don't know how many dresses, and other things too. He was in Maslak's brigade and made his way home from there. He must have deserted, I think. He's brought his weapons back with him."

"What weapons?" Misha asked.

"You know what: a carbine and a pistol and possibly other stuff."

"Has he been to the Soviet to register, do you know?"

Prokhor laughed and waved his hand: "You couldn't drag him there at the end of a rope! I can't help thinking he's on the run. If not today, then tomorrow he'll be slipping away from home. Now

Kirill, by all the signs, is thinking of doing some more fighting; but you think wrong of me. No, brother, I've done my fighting; I'm fed up to the back teeth with that form of amusement."

Prokhor left soon afterwards. A little later Misha also went outside. Dunya fed the children and was getting ready for bed when Misha came back. In his hands he held something wrapped in a sack.

"Where the devil have you been?" Dunya asked ungraciously.

"I've been getting my dowry," Misha smiled amiably. He unwrapped a carefully packed rifle, a pouch bulging with cartridges, a pistol, and two hand-grenades. He laid them all on a bench and carefully poured some paraffin into a dish.

"Where's all that come from?" Dunya indicated the weapons with her eyebrows.

"They're mine; I brought them back from the front."

"Then where did you have them hidden?"

"Never mind where; they've been well looked after."

"Well, you're fond of keeping things to yourself, I must say. . . . You didn't say a word about it. Hiding things even from your wife?"

With forcedly carefree smile, obviously making up to her, Misha said:

"And why should I have told you, Dunya? This isn't a woman's business. Let it lie; it's not a bad thing to have by you, girl."

"But what have you brought it into the house for? You're such a law-abiding Cossack now, you know

everything.... But won't you have to answer for this to the law?"

Misha's face set hard, and he said:

"You're a fool! When Kirill Gromov brings back weapons, that's danger to the Soviet regime; but when I bring them back, it'll only be gain to the Soviet regime. Do you understand? Who will I have to answer to? You're babbling God knows what; go to bed and sleep."

He had made what in his opinion was the only sound deduction: if Whites were coming back with weapons, then he had got to be on his guard. He diligently cleaned the rifle and pistol, and next morning, as soon as it was light, he went off on foot to Vyeshenskaya.

As Dunya put food into his haversack she exclaimed bitterly and angrily: "You're always keeping something from me! Do at least say how long you're going for and why you're going. What the devil do you call this life? He just gets ready to go, and you can't get a word out of him! Are you my husband or a button on my shirt?"

"I'm going to Vyeshenskaya, to the Military Commission. What else do you want me to tell you? You'll know everything when I get back."

Holding his haversack against his side, Misha dropped down to the Don, got into the boat, and swiftly rowed across to the farther bank.

At Vyeshenskaya, after a medical examination the doctor curtly told Misha: "My dear Comrade, you're no good for service in the ranks of the Red Army. Malaria's made rather a bad mess of you. You'd bet-

ter take a course of treatment or you'll get worse. The Red Army doesn't need your sort."

"Then what sort does it need? I've served two years, but now I'm not needed any more, is that it?"

"What we need first and foremost is men in good health. You get well, and then you'll do. Take this prescription, you'll get quinine at the chemist's."

"I see!" Koshevoi drew on his shirt as though putting a collar on a restive horse; he seemed unable to get his head through the opening. He buttoned up his trousers in the street and made straight for the party regional committee.

He returned to Tatarsky as chairman of the village Revolutionary Committee. Hurriedly greeting his wife, he said: "Well, now we'll see!"

"What do you mean by that?" Dunya asked in surprise.

"Just the same as before."

"And what was that?"

"I've been appointed chairman. Understand?"

Dunya clapped her hands in her vexation. She was about to make some remark, but Misha did not stop to listen to her. Standing before the mirror, he adjusted the belt on his faded khaki tunic and strode off to the Soviet.

Old Mikheyev had been appointed chairman of the Revolutionary Committee in the winter and had held the office ever since. A little blind and deaf, he was harassed by his responsibilities and was delighted when Koshevoi told him he was to be relieved.

"Here are the papers, my eagle; here's the village stamp; take them, for Christ's sake!" he said with

unfeigned pleasure, crossing himself and rubbing his hands. "I'm in my seventies now, and never in all my life have I held any office, but it fell to me in my old age. . . . It's just the right sort of work for a young man like you, but what use am I? I can't see properly, and I can't hear properly. . . . It's time I was saying my prayers, but they went and appointed me chairman. . . ."

Misha hurriedly scanned the instructions and orders sent by the district Revolutionary Committee, and asked: "Where's the secretary?"

"Eh?"

"Damn it, I said where's the secretary?"

"The secretary? He's sowing rye. He only comes here once a week, may he be struck by lightning! Sometimes a paper comes from the district, and it's got to be read, but you couldn't find him with bloodhounds. And so an important paper has to lie for several days unread. For I'm bad at my letters, very bad! I can only just manage to sign my name, and I can't read at all; all I can do is use the stamp. . . ."

Knitting his brows, Koshevoi examined the scratched and dingy walls of the Revolutionary Committee's room, decorated with a single ancient and fly-blown placard.

Old Mikhayev was so delighted at his unexpected dismissal that he even ventured to jest: as he handed Koshevoi the stamp, wrapped in a piece of rag, he said: "That's the entire village property; there's no money to be handed over, and under the Soviet regime the ataman's insignia aren't regarded with favour. If you like I can give you my old stick." Smil-

ing a toothless smile, he held out his ash stick, its handle well polished by much use.

But Koshevoi did not feel in the mood for joking. Once more he looked around the miserable, neglected room, frowned, and said with a sigh:

"We'll reckon that I've taken everything over from you, grandad. Now hop off out of here and go to the devil!" He indicated the door expressively with his eyes.

Then he seated himself at the table, sprawling his elbows, and sat there alone, gritting his teeth, thrusting out his lower jaw. God, what a son of a bitch he had been all these past days, while he had been scratching about in the earth, not raising his head or listening properly to all that was going on around him! Annoyed beyond words with himself and everything else, he rose from the table, straightened his tunic and said through set teeth, gazing into the distance: "Yes, my lads, I'll show you what the Soviet Government is!"

He shut the door, fastening it by the chain, and strode homeward across the square. Close to the church he met Obnizov's youngster, nodded to him carelessly, walked past and, suddenly struck by an idea, turned and shouted: "Hey, Andryusha! Wait a bit; here, I want you!"

The fair-haired, bashful lad came back without speaking. Misha held out his hand to him as though he were a man and asked: "Where were you off to? The other end of the village? So you're out for a stroll, are you? This is what I wanted to ask you: you went to the advanced elementary school, didn't you?"

You did? That's good! Do you know anything about office work?"

"What sort of office work?"

"Oh, just the ordinary sort. You know, the incomings and outgoings, that sort of thing."

"What are you getting at, Comrade Koshevoi?"

"Why, the papers you get in an office. Do you know anything about them? You know, there are papers which have to be sent out, and there are other sorts too."

Misha wriggled his fingers vaguely and, without waiting for an answer, said firmly: "If you don't know, you can soon learn. I'm chairman of the village Revolutionary Committee now, and as you're an educated lad, I appoint you the secretary. Go to the Revolutionary Committee house and watch over things there; you'll find them all lying on the table. And I'll be back soon. Understand?"

"Comrade Koshevoi!"

Misha waved his hand and said impatiently: "We can talk it all over later; you go and take up your duties." Slowly, with a measured stride, he went on along the street.

At home he put on new trousers, thrust his pistol into his pocket, and spent some time arranging his cap before the mirror.

"I'm just going somewhere on business," he remarked to Dunya. "If anyone asks where the chairman is, tell them I'll soon be back."

The position of chairman made certain things obligatory. Misha walked slowly and importantly; this was so unusual for him that some of the villagers

halted and gazed after him with smiles on their faces. Prokhor Zykov, who met him in the street, fell back to the fence with an air of respect and asked: "But what's all this for, Mikhail? All dressed up in your best on a work-day and marching along as though on parade? You aren't going to get married again, are you?"

"Something of the sort," Misha replied, compressing his lips with some dignity.

Outside Gromov's gate he thrust his hand into his pocket for his pouch and gave a keen glance around the spacious yard, the buildings scattered about it, and the windows of the house.

Kirill Gromov's mother happened to be coming out of the porch with a dish of pumpkin cut into small pieces for cattle food. Misha greeted her respectfully and strode towards the steps.

"Is Kirill at home, aunty?"

"Yes, he's at home, go straight in!" the old woman said, stepping aside for him to pass.

Misha went into the dark porch and groped in the semi-darkness for the door-handle.

Kirill himself opened the door of the best room to him and fell back a step. Clean-shaven, smiling, and a little tipsy, he gave Misha a curt, searching glance and said in an easy tone: "Yet another soldier! Come in, Koshevoi, and sit down, be our guest. We were just having a drink, just a little drink..."

"Hospitality makes for tasty victuals!" Misha shook the master's hand as he looked at the guests sitting around the table.

His arrival was obviously inopportune. A broad-

shouldered Cossack, a stranger to Mikhail, sprawling at the far corner under the icons, gave Kirill a curt, interrogative glance as he pushed his glass away from him. Semyon Akhvatkin, a distant relative of the Korshunovs, who was sitting on the opposite side, frowned when he saw Misha and turned his eyes away.

Kirill invited Misha to sit down.

"Thank you for the invitation."

"But do sit down, don't offend us, have a drink with us."

Misha sat down at the table. Taking the glass of home-made vodka from his host's hands, he nodded: "Here's to your return home, Kirill Ivanovich!"

"Thank you. Have you been back from the army long?"

"Very long. I've had time to settle down."

"To settle down and get married too, by all accounts. But what are you pulling a face for? Drink it up!"

"I don't want any more. I've got some business to talk over with you."

"Now that's too much! Don't try that on me! I'm not talking about business today! Today I'm enjoying myself with my friends. If you've come on business, call again tomorrow."

Misha rose from the table. Smiling calmly, he said: "It's only a little matter, but it won't wait. Come outside for a minute."

Stroking his neatly twisted black moustache, Kirill was silent for a moment, then he rose.

"Perhaps we can talk here. Why break up the company?"

"No, let's go outside," Misha replied quietly but insistently.

"Go outside with him; what are you chaffering over?" said the strange, broad-shouldered Cossack.

Kirill reluctantly led the way into the kitchen. To his wife, who was busy at the stove, he muttered: "Clear out of here, Katerina!" Then, sitting down on the bench, he asked curtly: "Well, what's the business?"

"How many days have you been back?"

"Why, what's the matter?"

"How many days have you been back, I asked."

"This is the fourth, I think."

"And have you been to the Revolutionary Committee yet?"

"Not yet."

"And are you thinking of going to see the Military Commission at Vyeshenskaya?"

"What are you after? If you've come on business, talk about your business."

"I am talking about my business."

"Then go to the devil! Who the hell do you think you are, that I've got to give you an answer?"

"I'm chairman of the Revolutionary Committee. Show me your regimental papers."

"So that's it!" Kirill drawled, and looked with a keen, suddenly sober glance into Misha's eyes. "So that's what you're after?"

"Yes, you've got it! Hand over your papers."

"I'll call at the Soviet with them today."

"Show them this minute!"

"I've got them packed away somewhere."

"Then find them!"

"No, I'm not going to look for them now. Go home, Mikhail, don't make a scene here."

"It'll be a short scene I'll make with you!" Misha put his right hand into his pocket. "Get your coat on!"

"Drop it, Mikhail! You'd better not lay hands on me. . . ."

"Come on, I tell you!"

"Where to?"

"To the Revolutionary Committee."

"I don't particularly want to. . . ." Kirill turned pale, but he spoke with a humorous smile on his face.

Swaying a little to the left, Misha pulled his pistol out of his pocket and cocked it.

"Are you coming or not?" he asked quietly.

Without a word Kirill strode towards the best room. But Misha placed himself in his way and with his eyes indicated the door leading to the porch.

"Boys!" Kirill shouted with assumed unconcern, "I've been sort of arrested here. Finish off the vodka without me."

The door of the best room was flung wide open, and Akhvatkin started to cross the threshold. But, seeing the pistol pointed at him, he hurriedly fell back behind the door-post.

"Come on!" Misha ordered Kirill.

With an affectedly jaunty stride Kirill went towards the door, lazily took hold of the latch, and suddenly, clearing the porch with one bound, furiously slammed the outer door and leaped down the steps. As, bent double, he ran across the yard towards the orchard, Misha fired at him twice without hitting him. Stand-

ing with his feet wide apart, laying the barrel of his pistol across the elbow of his crooked left arm, Koshevoi took deliberate aim. At the third shot Kirill seemed to stumble, but recovering, he sprang lightly over the fence. Misha ran down from the porch. The dry crack of a rifle-shot sounded from the house behind him. In front there was a thud as the bullet picked out the clay in the whitewashed wall of a shed and sent grey fragments of stone scattering over the ground.

Kirill ran swiftly and easily. His stooping figure flashed among the green foliage of the apple-trees. Misha leaped the fence, but fell, and as he lay, fired twice more at the fugitive, then turned to face the house. The outside door was wide open. Kirill's mother was standing on the steps, her palm shielding her eyes, gazing into the orchard. "I should have shot him on the spot without stopping to talk!" Misha thought numbly. He lay for several minutes by the fence, gazing at the house, and with a measured, mechanical movement cleaned off the mud sticking to his knees. Then he rose, climbed heavily across the fence, and, holding the pistol with its barrel pointed downward, went back to the house.

In addition to Gromov, Akhvatkin and the strange Cossack whom Misha had seen in the Gromov's room also vanished. During the night two other Cossacks disappeared from the village. A small detachment of the Don Cheka arrived at Tatarsky from Vyeshen-

skaya. They arrested certain of the Cossacks and sent four, who had come home from their regiments without documents, to the penal company at Vyeshenskaya.

Koshevoi spent all his days sitting in the Revolutionary Committee room, returning home at dusk. He always put his loaded rifle by the bed, thrust his pistol under the pillow, and lay down to sleep without undressing. The third day after the incident with Kirill he said to Dunya: "Let's sleep in the porch."

"What on earth for?" Dunya asked in amazement.

"They might fire through the window. The bed's close to the window."

Without a word Dunya shifted the bed into the porch. But that evening she asked: "Well, and how long are we to go on living like hunted hares? The winter's coming on, and are we to roost in the porch then?"

"The winter's a long way off yet, but meantime that's how we've got to live."

"And how long will this 'meantime' last?"

"Until I've dealt with Kirill."

"Do you think he's going to put his head into your hands?"

"He will some day," Misha answered confidently.

But he was wrong: Kirill Gromov and his friends had hidden somewhere on the farther side of the Don. Hearing that the anarchist commander Makhno was getting near the district, they made their way back to the other bank and went off to the stanitsa of Krasnokutskaya, where, so rumour said, the advance detachments of Makhno's band had already appeared.

Kirill spent the night in Tatarsky and chancing to meet Prokhor Zykov in the street, told him to inform Koshevoi that Gromov sent his respectful greetings and asked Misha to expect a return visit before long. Next morning Prokhor told Misha of his meeting and talk with Kirill.

"All right! Let him turn up! He's got away once, but he won't a second time. He's taught me how to treat the likes of him, and I thank him for the lesson," Misha said when Prokhor had finished.

Makhno and his band had in fact arrived in the Upper Don Region. In a short fight close to Konkov he smashed an infantry battalion sent from Vyeshenskaya to meet him. However, he did not advance towards the regional centre, but made in the direction of Millerovo Station, crossed the railway to the north of it, and retreated towards Starobelsk. The most active of the White Guard elements among the Cossacks went off to him, but the majority remained at home, waiting to see what happened.

Koshevoi went on living with his ear to the ground, closely watching all that went on in the village. But life in Tatarsky was not particularly cheerful. The Cossacks ardently cursed the Soviet regime for all the shortages which they were having to experience. There was almost nothing in the tiny shop which the local co-operative society had recently opened. Soap, sugar, salt, paraffin, matches, tobacco, axle-grease—all these articles of prime importance were lacking, and the bare shelves exhibited expensive packets of cigarettes and bits of ironware which went unsold for months on end.

In place of paraffin the villagers used melted butter and fat in saucers. Manufactured tobacco was replaced by home-grown tobacco. In the absence of matches, flints and lighters roughly made by the smiths came into general use. Tinder was boiled in a solution of sunflower stalks and water to make it catch alight more quickly, but even so it was difficult to obtain a light. More than once, returning home of an evening from the Revolutionary Committee Misha saw smokers gathered in a circle at a corner, engaged in vigorously striking sparks from flints, cursing under their breath and whispering: "Soviet Government, give us a light!" At last one of them would get a spark to fall on the dry tinder, it flared up, and everyone blew together on the feeble flame. After lighting their cigarettes they quietly squatted down on their heels and began exchanging the news.

Nor was there any paper with which to make cigarettes. All the registers were carried off from the church vestry, and when the Cossacks had smoked them, everything in the huts themselves was used for making cigarettes, including children's old school-books and even the older people's religious books.

Prokhor Zykov, who was a frequent visitor to the Melekhov yard, obtained all the paper he could from Mikhail and said mournfully:

"The lid of my wife's family chest was pasted all over with old newspapers—I tore them off and smoked them. We had a New Testament, a religious book, you know. But I've smoked it too. And I've smoked the Old Testament. The holy saints didn't write enough of these testaments. My wife used to keep a family

record; she'd got all our relations, alive and dead, written down in it. I smoked that book too. And now what—have I got to smoke cabbage leaves or use burdocks for paper? No, Mikhail, say what you like, but give us a newspaper. I can't live without a smoke. When I was at the German front I swapped my ration of bread more than once for an ounce of tobacco."

Life in Tatarsky was far from cheerful that autumn. The ungreased wheels of the wagons squeaked as they rolled along, the leather harness and footwear dried and cracked for lack of grease, but most keenly felt of all was the lack of salt. Tatarsky folk would go to Vyeshenskaya and sell a well-fed sheep for five pounds of salt and come back, cursing the Soviet Government. That accursed salt caused Mikhail a lot of bitterness. One day a group of the old men came to the Soviet. They sedately greeted the chairman, took off their caps, and seated themselves on the benches.

"There's no salt in the village, mister chairman," said one of them.

"There are no misters now," Misha corrected him.

"Please excuse me, I always say it out of habit. . . . We can live without the misters, but we can't without salt."

"Well, what is it you want, elders?"

"Chairman, you must do something to get salt brought to the village. We can't cart it all the way from Manych with bullocks."

"I've reported on the matter to the Region. They know all about it. They ought to be sending some soon."

"While the sun's rising the dew rots the seeds," said one of the old men, staring down at the floor.

Misha flared up and rose from the table. Livid with anger, he turned out his pockets.

"I haven't got any salt. Do you see? I don't carry it about with me and I can't suck it out of my fingers for you. Do you understand, elders?"

"Where on earth has it got to, this salt?" one-eyed old Chumakov asked after a moment's silence, looking around in astonishment with his one eye. "In the old days, under the former government, nobody even had to speak about it; it lay in piles everywhere. But now you can't even get hold of a pinch of it..."

"Our government has got nothing to do with it," Misha said more calmly. "The only government that's to blame for it is your former cadet government. It was they who did so much destruction that there's not even anything to cart salt with. All the railway lines are smashed, and the trucks too."

He spent a great deal of time telling the old men how during the retreat the Whites had destroyed the state property, had blown up factories and burned down warehouses. He had seen some of it himself during the war, he had heard more, and the rest he imaginatively invented with the sole object of turning the discontent away from his own Soviet Government. To defend that government from reproaches he made up a few ingenious tales, thinking the while: "It won't do much harm if I stretch a point about those swine. They're swine in any case, so they won't be any the worse for it, while it'll be to our gain..."

"Do you think that these bourgeoisie aren't clever,

or what? They're not fools. They collected all the stocks of sugar and salt, thousands of pounds of it, from all over Russia and carried it off to the Crimea, and there they loaded it on steamers and sent it to other countries to be sold," he said, his eyes glittering.

"And did they cart off all the axle-grease too?" the one-eyed Chumakov asked distrustfully.

"Do you think they were going to leave it behind for you, grandad? A lot of need they have of you, or any of the toiling people. They'll find someone to sell even the grease to! They'd have carted off everything with them if they could, so that the people here would die of hunger."

"That's true, of course," one of the old men agreed. "The rich are all like that, out to get the last grain. The richer you are, the greedier you are, we've all known that for many a long day. In Vyeshenskaya there was a merchant who piled everything he had on wagons when the first retreat took place. He carried off all his property down to the last reel of thread. And the Reds got quite close, but there he was, still not ready to drive out of his yard, running about dressed in a sheepskin, pulling the nails out of the walls with pincers. 'I'm not going to leave a single nail behind for them, damn them!' he said. So it's no great wonder they carried off the grease with them."

"But all the same, how are we going to manage without salt?" old Maksayev asked amiably towards the end of the talk.

"Our workers will soon dig up more salt, and meantime you can send wagons to Manych," Misha advised guardedly.

"The people don't want to drive there. The Kalmyks are causing trouble, they won't let us have salt at the lakes, and they carry off our bullocks. An acquaintance of mine came back with only his knout. One night three armed Kalmyks rode up and drove off his bullocks and pointed to their throats: 'Keep your mouth shut,' they said, 'or you'll come to a bad end, man.' That's what it's like to drive there!"

"We'll have to wait a bit," Chumakov sighed.

Misha managed to come to some kind of agreement with the elders, but at home he and Dunya had high words over this very question of salt. Something was going definitely wrong in Misha's relations with his wife.

It had all begun on that memorable day when he had talked about Grigory in Prokhor's presence. That little squabble had not been forgotten. One evening at supper Misha said: "Your soup isn't salted, mistress. If there's not enough on the table you may get too much thrashed out of your back, you know."

"Under this government there isn't likely to be too much salt anywhere for some time to come. Do you know how much salt we've got left?"

"Well?"

"Two handfuls."

"Things are in a bad way," Misha sighed.

"Other folk rode off to Manych for salt way back in the summer, but you've never had time to think about it," Dunya said reproachfully.

"What could I have driven with? In our first year of wedded life it doesn't seem right to harness you up, and as for real bullocks. . . ."

"You leave your jokes for another time! When you're eating unsalted food, then you can joke!"

"What are you turning on me for? Tell me where I'm to get salt from? What a lot you are, you women! 'Belch it up if you like, but give us salt!' But supposing there isn't any, curse it?"

"Other folk drove to Manych with bullocks. And now they've got salt and everything, but we'll be chewing tasteless stuff. . . ."

"We'll get through it somehow, Dunya. They ought to be sending us salt soon. Have we got so little of the stuff?"

"You've got plenty of everything!"

"Who's 'you'?"

"The Reds."

"And what are you then?"

"I'm what you see. You've talked and talked: 'We'll have plenty of everything, and we'll all be living on the same level, and living well. . . .' Is this what you call living well? With nothing to salt our soup?"

Misha stared at his wife in alarm and turned pale.

"What's all this, Dunya? What are you saying? How can you talk like that?"

But Dunya had got the bit between her teeth: she also went pale with anger and indignation and, raising her voice to a shout, went on: "Well, how can we live this? What are you staring your eyes out for? Do you know, chairman, that already people's gums are swelling from lack of salt? They're digging up earth on the salt patches, people go as far even as Ne-

chayev mound to get to it, and they put this earth into their soup.... Have you heard about that?"

"Wait a bit, don't shout so much.... Well, and what next?"

Dunya clapped her hands. "What else do you want?"

"But we've got to put up with it somehow, haven't we?"

"Well, you put up with it!"

"I'll put up with it, but you— All your Melekhov character is coming out now."

"What character?"

"Your counter-revolutionary character, that's what!" Misha said thickly, and rose from the table. He stared down at the floor and would not raise his eyes to his wife. His lips trembled as he said: "If you talk like that again, you and I shan't be living together, understand that! Your words are the words of an enemy...."

Dunya was about to make some retort, but Misha narrowed his eyes at her and raised his fist.

"Hold your tongue!" he said huskily.

Dunya gazed at him fearlessly, with open curiosity. After a moment she said calmly and cheerfully: "Well, all right, the devil knows it's a fine subject to talk about.... We'll manage without salt!" She was silent for a second and then added with the quiet smile of which Misha was so fond: "Don't be angry, Misha! If you're going to be angry with us women over everything, you'll never stop being angry. What else can you expect from a stupid head? Will you have some

stewed fruit or shall I put out some sour milk for you?"

Despite her youth, Dunya was already rich in worldly wisdom, and she knew when to be obstinate in an argument and when it was necessary to make peace and retreat.

A couple of weeks later a letter arrived from Grigory. He wrote that he had been wounded on the Wrangel front and that, after recovering he would probably be demobilized. Dunya told Misha the contents of the letter and guardedly asked: "Misha, when he comes home, how shall we manage?"

"We'll move to my hut. He can live here by himself. We'll share the property."

"We certainly can't live together. By all the signs he'll bring Aksinya here."

"Even if it was possible I'd never live under the same roof with your brother," Misha declared sharply.

Dunya raised her eyebrows in astonishment. "Why not, Misha?"

"You know well enough!"

"You mean because he served with the Whites?"

"You've got it."

"How you dislike him! And yet you were friends once."

"What the devil have I got to like him for? We were friends, but our friendship came to an end long ago."

Dunya was seated at the spinning-wheel. The wheel hummed rhythmically. Suddenly the thread broke. Dunya held the rim of the wheel with her palm and, as she twisted the two ends together, asked without

looking at her husband: "When he comes back, what will happen about his service with the Cossacks?"

"There'll be a trial—a tribunal."

"But what is he likely to be sentenced to?"

"Well, I'm not to know that; I'm not the judge."

"Could he be shot?"

Misha stared at the bed where Mishatka and Polyushka were asleep, listened to their steady breathing, and, lowering his voice, answered: "He could be."

Dunya asked no more questions. Next morning, after milking the cow she went to see Aksinya.

"Grisha will be back soon, so I dropped in to cheer you with the news," she said.

Aksinya silently set an iron pot of water on the coals and pressed her hands to her breast. Looking at her flaming face, Dunya said: "But don't cheer up too much! My man says he won't be able to get out of a trial. What they'll sentence him to God alone knows."

For a second, terror lurked in Aksinya's moist and glittering eyes.

"What for?" she asked jerkily, still unable to drive the belated smile from her lips.

"For the rising . . . for everything."

"Nonsense! They won't try him. Your Mikhail knows nothing about it. A fine know-all he is!"

"Perhaps they won't." Dunya was silent, then said, suppressing a sigh: "He's wild with my brother. And it weighs so heavily on my heart, I can't tell you how much! I'm terribly sorry for Grigory. He's been wounded again. His life's all out of joint, somehow."

"So long as he comes back! We'll take the children and hide somewhere," Aksinya said agitatedly.

For some reason she removed her kerchief, then put it on again and aimlessly began to shift the pots about on the bench, quite unable to master the violent agitation which had taken possession of her. Dunya noticed how her hands were trembling as she sat down on the bench and began to smooth out the folds of her old, worn apron over her knees.

Something rose in Dunya's throat. She felt like going off somewhere to cry by herself.

"Mother didn't live to see him come back . . ." she said quietly. "Well, I'm going. I've got to light the stove."

In the passage Aksinya hurriedly and awkwardly kissed her on the neck, then snatched up her hand and kissed it.

"Are you glad?" Dunya asked in a low, unsteady voice.

"Yes, just a little, only a very little," Aksinya answered, trying to jest, to hide her tears behind a tremulous smile.

VI

At Millerovo Station Grigory, as a demobilized Red commander, was assigned a wagon and horses. He changed the horses at every Ukrainian settlement he passed through on his way home and reached the bounds of the Upper Don Region the same day. But at the very first Cossack village he drove into, the chairman of the Revolutionary Committee, a young man only recently returned from the Red Army, told him: "You'll have to have bullocks, Comrade Commander.

We've only got one horse in all the village, and that hobbles on three legs. All the horses were left behind in the Kuban during the retreat."

"Perhaps I can manage with the one?" Grigory asked, tapping his fingers on the table, looking interrogatively into the genial chairman's merry eyes.

"You'll never get there. You'll be driving a week and still you'll not get there! But don't be alarmed, we've got good bullocks with a long stride, and we've got to send a wagon to Vyeshenskaya in any case, to take some telephone wire that got stranded here after the war. So you won't have to change wagons, it'll put you down right outside your door." The chairman screwed up his left eye and added, smiling and winking slyly: "We'll give you our finest bullocks and a young widow for driver. We've got one here who's so hot you'd never even dream of a hotter! With her for company you'll be home before you know it. I've been in the army myself, I know all a soldier's needs. . . ."

Grigory thought it over and decided that to wait for a wagon going his way would be absurd; and it was a long way to go on foot. He would have to agree and accept the bullocks.

The wagon drove up within an hour. It was ancient, the wheels squeaked miserably, the frame at the back was broken and jagged, and the carelessly loaded hay hung from it in wisps. "There's your war!" Grigory thought as he looked with disgust at the miserable turn-out. The driver strode along beside the bullocks, waving her whip. She was certainly a very good-looking woman, and well built. Her massive breasts, out

of proportion to her height, rather spoilt her figure, while a slanting scar on her round chin gave her face a hard-boiled look and seemed to age her ruddily brown face, which around the bridge of her nose was sprinkled with golden freckles as fine as millet seed.

As she arranged her kerchief she screwed up her eyes, looked Grigory over, and asked: "Is it you I've got to take?"

Grigory rose from the step and flung his greatcoat around him.

"Yes. Have you loaded the wire?"

"Who do they think I am?" the Cossack woman cried in a ringing voice. "Every day they want me to drive somewhere and do work for them! Is that what I am to them? Let them load the wire themselves, and if they won't then I'll drive empty."

Yet she dragged the rolls of wire on to the wagon, noisily but amicably exchanged curses with the chairman and occasionally threw sidelong, scrutinizing glances at Grigory. The chairman laughed, and looked at the young widow with genuine admiration. From time to time he gave Grigory a wink, as though saying: "That's the sort of women we've got! Didn't I tell you!"

Beyond the village the brown, faded autumnal steppe stretched away in the distance. A dove-grey ribbon of smoke dragged from the ploughed lands across the road. The ploughmen were burning the weeds: dry, bushy hemp nettle, withered meadow grass. The scent of the smoke awakened mournful memories in Grigory: at one time he too had ploughed up the lands in the lonely autumnal steppe,

gazed at night at the stars glittering in the dark void of the sky and listened to the cries of the flocks of geese flying in the zenith. He shifted about, fidgeting on the hay, and looked at his driver.

"How old are you, good woman?"

"Close on sixty," she answered coquettishly, smiling with only her eyes.

"No, without joking."

"Twenty."

"And a widow?"

"Yes."

"Then what happened to your husband?"

"He was killed."

"Recently?"

"Two years ago now."

"During the rising, then?"

"Afterwards, in the autumn."

"And how do you manage?"

"Oh, I manage somehow."

"Do you find life lonesome?"

She gazed at him attentively and pulled her kerchief over her lips to hide her smile. Her voice sounded thicker and a new note crept into it when she answered: "There's no time for being lonely when you're at work."

"But isn't it lonesome without your husband?"

"I live with my mother-in-law, and we've got plenty to do on the farm."

"But how do you manage without your husband?"

She turned her face towards Grigory. A flush played on her swarthy cheeks, little ruddy sparks flamed up and faded in her eyes.

"What are you getting at?"

"Just what I said."

She shifted her kerchief away from her lips and said with a drawl: "Well, there's enough of that blessing in this life! There are plenty of obliging folk in this world!" After a pause she went on: "I didn't get much chance of tasting the joys of woman's life with my husband. We only spent a month together, and then he was taken off into the army. I manage somehow without him. It's easier now young Cossacks have come back to the village, but before that it was hard. Gee up, bald-head! Gee up! So now you know, soldier! That's my life!"

Grigory said no more. He had no desire to carry on the conversation in such a bantering tone. Already he felt rather regretful that he had started it.

The great well-fed bullocks plodded along steadily with the same measured, shambling gait. At some time or other one of them had had its right horn broken, and the horn had grown down crosswise over its head. Resting on his elbow, half closing his eyes, Grigory lay in the wagon. He began to recall the bullocks he had worked with in his childhood and later, when he had grown up. They were all different in colouring, in build, in character; even in their horns each had its distinctive feature. At one time he had handled a bullock with a crumpled horn just like this one. Ill-tempered and cunning, it always looked out of the corners of its eyes, rolling its bloodshot whites; it tried to kick when approached from behind, and when the animals were let loose to graze at night, it would try to make its way home, or, still worse,

hide in the forest or in the distant dells. Grigory had often spent a long day riding on horseback over the steppe and, after giving up hope of ever finding the lost bullock, had suddenly discovered it somewhere in the very bottom of a ravine, in an impenetrable thicket of thorn, or in the shade of an old and spreading crab apple-tree. That crumple-horned devil could slip its head out of the bullock lead, and at night it used to raise the cross-bar of the gate to the cattle-yard, and, after swimming across the Don, would go wandering through the meadowland. That bullock had caused Grigory plenty of trouble in its time.

"What's that bullock with the crumpled horn like? Quiet?" he asked the woman.

"Yes. Why, what about it?"

"I was only interested."

"'Only' is a good word, if there's nothing more to say," the woman declared with a smile.

Grigory was silent again. It was pleasant thinking about the past, about those days of peace, about work, about everything that had nothing to do with war. Seven years of war had fed him up beyond words, and at the very recollection of it, of some episode connected with his army service, he felt a gripping nausea and numb irritation.

He had done with fighting—had enough of it. He was riding home in order, at last, to get down to work, to live with his children, with Aksinya. While still at the front he had firmly resolved to take Aksinya to himself, for her to rear his children and to be always at his side. That story also must be ended, and the sooner the better.

He dreamed of how when he got home he would take off his tunic and boots, put on broad-fitting sandals, tuck his trousers Cossack-fashion into his white woollen stockings, and, throwing his home-spun coat around his warm jacket, drive off into the fields. It would be good to have his hands on the plough-handles and walk along the damp furrow behind the plough, his nostrils greedily drinking in the raw, fresh scent of crumbling earth, the bitter smell of grass cut by the ploughshare. In other lands even the earth and the grasses had a different smell. More than once in Poland, in the Ukraine and the Crimea, he had rubbed a grey stalk of wormwood between his palms, had smelt it, and had thought wistfully: "No, it's not the same, it's different. . . ."

But his driver was finding life boring. She wanted to talk. She stopped urging on the bullocks, seated herself comfortably, and, playing with the leather tassel of her knout, surreptitiously examined Grigory, his concentrated face, his half-closed eyes. "He's not so very old, though he is grey. And he's a queer fellow, somehow! Screwing up his eyes all the time. What's he keep doing it for? You'd think he was tired out, you'd think somebody had been using him as a cart-horse. . . . He looks as though he'd seen some trouble in his time. But he isn't bad-looking really. Only a lot of grey hair, and his moustache is nearly grey too. But otherwise he's not bad. What's he thinking so much for? At first it looked as though he was going to be jolly, but then he shut up and for some reason asked about the bullock. Doesn't he know what to talk about? Or perhaps he's shy. He doesn't look

it. He's got hard eyes. No, he's a good Cossack, only queer, somehow. Well then, keep your mouth shut, you hunchbacked devil! Much need I've got of you! I can hold my tongue too. So keen to get home to his wife! Well, hold your tongue, and much good may it do you!"

She lolled back against the ribs of the wagon and began to sing quietly.

Grigory raised his head and gazed at the sun. The day was still young. Last year's thistles morosely standing guard over the road threw a shadow the length of half a stride; it would not be more than two in the afternoon.

The steppe lay in a dead silence as though enchanted. The sun warmed but little. A light breeze noiselessly stirred the withered, reddish-brown grass. Neither bird's call nor suslik's whistle was to be heard. No kites or eagles were soaring in the cold, pale-blue sky. Only once did a grey shadow slip across the road, and, before he raised his head, Grigory heard the heavy sweep of great wings as an ashy-grey bustard flew past and settled by a distant mound, where a hollow lying in shadow blended with the lilac glooms of the distance. Only late in the autumn had Grigory ever known such a mournful and profound silence in the steppe, when it would seem to him that he heard the tumble-weed caught up by the wind go rustling over the sapless grass, traversing the steppe far, far ahead.

It seemed that the road would never end. It wound up over a slope, dropped into a ravine, climbed again to the summit of a rise. And always the same—un-

bounded to the eye—the desolate pastureland of the steppe extended all around.

Grigory's eyes were gladdened by a bush of maple growing on the slope of the ravine. Seared by the first frosts, its leaves gleamed a dusky purple, as though sprinkled with the embers of a dying camp-fire.

"What's your name, man?" his driver asked, gently touching his shoulder with her knout.

He started and turned his face to her. She looked away.

"Grigory. What's yours?"

"Call me what you like."

"You should keep quiet, 'what you like'!"

"I'm tired of keeping quiet. I've been quiet for half a day, my mouth's quite dry. Why are you so sad, Grisha?"

"Well, why should I be merry?"

"You're going home, so you ought to be."

"My years of merriment have passed."

"Go on! You *are* an old man, aren't you! But what turned you grey so young?"

"You want to know everything.... It must be the good life I've led that's made me grey."

"Are you married, Grisha?"

"Yes. And you'd do well to find another husband quickly."

"Why?"

"Well, you're a little bit too playful...."

"Is that so terrible?"

"It can be. I knew a playful woman like you once—she was a widow too—she played and played, but then her nose began to drop off."

"Dear me, how terrible!" the woman exclaimed in mock terror, and at once added in a business-like tone: "A widow's life is like that. If you're afraid of the wolf, don't go into the forest!"

Grigory glanced at her. She was laughing soundlessly, her fine white teeth pressed together. Her pouting upper lip twitched, her eyes gleamed mischievously from under her drooping lashes. Grigory involuntarily smiled and laid his hand on her warm, rounded knee.

"Poor kid!" he said commiseratingly. "Life has done a lot to you in twenty years."

In a flash not a trace was left of her merriment. She roughly pushed his hand away, knitted her brows, and flushed so deeply that the tiny freckles vanished from the bridge of her nose.

"You pity your wife when you get home! I've got enough sympathizers and to spare without you!"

"Don't be annoyed! Wait a bit!"

"Oh, go to the devil!"

"I said what I did because I was really sorry for you."

"You can take your sorrow straight ..." the masculine oath came fluently and easily to her lips, and her eyes flashed darkly.

Grigory raised his eyebrows and muttered in confusion: "Well, you can swear all right, there's no denying it! What a wild thing you are!"

"And what are you? A saint in a lousy greatcoat, that's what! I know you! Get married and all the rest of it! But how long have you been so saintly?"

"Not so very long," Grigory said with a laugh.

"Then what are you laying down the law to me for? I've got a mother-in-law who'll do that."

"Now, that's enough! What are you so angry about, you fool of a woman? I only put it that way," Grigory said in a conciliatory tone. "Now look! While we've been talking, the bullocks have got right off the road."

Making himself more comfortable in the wagon, Grigory gave a swift glance at the merry widow and noticed tears in her eyes. "Well, that's the last straw! These women are always like that . . ." he thought, feeling awkward and vexed.

Soon afterwards he fell asleep, lying on his back, covering his face with the edge of his greatcoat, and awoke only as dusk was falling. The evening stars were faintly shining in the sky. A fresh and cheerful smell of hay came to his nostrils.

"The bullocks have got to be fed," his driver said.

"All right, let's stop."

Grigory himself unharnessed the bullocks, then took a tin of meat and bread out of his field-pack; he collected a whole armful of dry scrub and made a fire not far from the wagon.

"Well, sit down and have some supper," he said to the woman. "You've been angry long enough."

She sat down by the fire and without a word shook bread and a lump of bacon-fat rusty with age out of her sack. They talked little and amicably over the supper. Then she climbed into the wagon to sleep, while Grigory threw several clumps of dry bullock-dung on the fire to keep it going and stretched himself out beside it, soldier-fashion. He lay for some time with his head resting on his field-pack, gazing up at the sky

glittering with stars, disconnectedly thinking of his children and of Aksinya, then dozed off. He was awakened by a stealthy woman's voice: "Are you asleep, soldier? Are you asleep or aren't you?"

He raised his head. Resting on her elbow, his companion was half hanging out of the wagon. Her face, lit up from below by the uncertain light of the dying fire, was rosy and fresh; her teeth and the lace edging of her kerchief gleamed dazzlingly in the darkness. She smiled again, as though there had been no words between them, and said, working her eyebrows: "I'm afraid you'll freeze down there. The earth's cold. If you're very cold come up with me. My sheepskin's ever so warm. Won't you come?"

Grigory reflected for a moment and answered with a sigh: "Thank you, girl, but I don't want to. Now, if it had been a year or two back. . . . I don't think I'll freeze by the fire."

She too sighed and said: "Well, as you like." And she drew her sheepskin over her head.

A little later Grigory rose to his feet and gathered up his things. He had decided to continue on foot in order to reach Tatarsky by dawn. It was absurd for him—a commander returning from service—to ride home in broad daylight in a bullock-wagon. Such a return would cause so much joking and talk.

He aroused the woman.

"I'm going on on foot. You won't be afraid of being left alone in the steppe?"

"No. I'm not a nervous sort, and there's a village not far off. But what's wrong? Getting impatient?"

"You've guessed it. Well, good-bye; don't think badly of me."

He took to the road and turned up the collar of his greatcoat. A first snowflake fell on his eye-lashes. The wind had shifted to the north, and in its cold breath Grigory imagined he could feel the familiar and pleasant scent of snow.

Koshevoi had gone to Vyeshenskaya, and returned in the evening. Through the window Dunya saw him drive up to the gate, and she swiftly threw a shawl around her shoulders and went out into the yard.

"Grisha came home this morning," she said at the wicket-gate, gazing at her husband anxiously and expectantly.

"A great joy for you!" Misha answered non-committally and with just a touch of humour.

Firmly pressing his lips together, he went into the kitchen. Below his cheek-bones the muscles were quivering. Polyushka in the clean frock her aunt had put on her had climbed up on Grigory's knee. Grigory carefully set the child on the floor and went to meet his brother-in-law, smiling and holding out his large, swarthy hand. He was about to embrace Mikhail, but noticed the cold, unfriendly look in his unsmiling eyes and refrained.

"Well, greetings, Misha!"

"Greetings."

"It's a long time since we saw each other last. It seems like a century."

"Yes, it's a long time. . . . Welcome home."

"Thank you. So we're kinsmen now?"

"Looks like it... What's that blood on your cheek?"

"It's nothing; I cut myself with the razor in my hurry."

They sat down at the table and silently examined each other, experiencing a feeling of awkwardness and estrangement. They would have to have a serious conversation together, but that was impossible at this moment. Mikhail had enough self-control to talk calmly about the farm and the changes which had occurred.

Grigory gazed through the window at the earth covered with the first bluish snow, at the bare boughs of the apple-tree. This was not how he had imagined his meeting with Mikhail.

Not long afterwards Mikhail went out. In the passage he carefully sharpened his knife on a whetstone and said to Dunya: "I'm going to find someone to slaughter a lamb. After all, the master must be given a fitting welcome. Run and get some vodka. No, wait! Go to Prokhor and tell him he's to get hold of vodka somewhere, even if he has to wear his feet out. He can do it better than you. Invite him along for the evening."

Dunya beamed with joy and gave her husband a look of silent gratitude. "Maybe everything will take a good turn... They've done fighting, what else have they to quarrel over now? May God bring them to reason!" she thought hopefully as she made her way to Prokhor's hut.

Less than half an hour later Prokhor came running in, panting.

"Grigory Panteleyevich! Old lad . . . I thought I'd never see you again!" he shouted in a high-pitched, weeping voice and, stumbling over the threshold, all but smashed the great ewer of vodka he was carrying.

He embraced Grigory, sobbing, wiping his eyes with his fist, and smoothing his moustache which was wet with tears. Something quivered in Grigory's throat, but he restrained himself. Deeply moved, he roughly clapped his faithful orderly on the back and said incoherently: "Well, so we've met again. . . . Well, and I'm glad, Prokhor, terribly glad! What are you crying for, old lad? Grown weak in the guts? The nuts working loose? How's your arm? So your wife hasn't torn your other off yet?"

Prokhor blew his nose violently and removed his sheepskin.

"The old woman and I live together these days like a couple of doves. As you say, my other arm is whole, and this one that the White Poles chopped off is growing again, God's truth! In a year now you'll be seeing fingers on it," he said with his customary cheeriness, shaking the empty sleeve of his shirt.

War had taught each of them to hide his real feelings behind a smile, to flavour both bread and talk with a good deal of salt; and so Grigory continued his questioning in the same jesting tone: "How are you living, you old goat? How are you bucking?"

"Like an old man, not in too great a hurry."

"You haven't caught anything else since you left me, have you?"

"What are you getting at?"

"Why, the thing you were boasting about last winter...."

"Panteleyevich! God forbid! What use would such a luxury be now? And besides, how could I go about it with only one arm? That's your business, that's a young man's job.... But it's high time I gave my outfit to the old woman to grease the frying-pans with."

They stood gazing at each other, these old trench comrades, laughing and rejoicing in the meeting.

"Home for good?" Prokhor asked.

"For good and all!"

"What rank did you win your way to?"

"I was second in command of the regiment!"

"Then why did they discharge you so soon?"

Grigory's face clouded, and he answered curtly: "They had no more use for me."

"And why was that?"

"I don't know. Because of my past, I expect."

"But you got through that Special Department Commission which sifted out all the officers, so how can they bring up the past now?"

"Who's to say?"

"But where's Mikhail?"

"In the yard. He's putting the cattle away."

Prokhor moved closer to Grigory and lowered his voice: "They shot Platon Ryabchikov a month ago."

"You don't mean it?"

"It's God's truth!"

The door creaked in the porch.

"We'll talk later," Prokhor whispered and, in a louder tone: "Well, Comrade Commander, shall we

drink to celebrate this great happiness? Shall I go and call Mikhail?"

"Yes, do."

Dunya laid the table. She did not know how best to please her brother; she laid a clean hand-towel over his knee, pushed across a tray of pickled water-melon, and polished his glass at least five times. Grigory noticed with a smile that Dunya was shy in addressing him and no longer used the familiar "thou."

At the table Mikhail at first maintained an obstinate silence, attentively listening to Grigory's talk. He drank little, and that reluctantly. But Prokhor downed vodka by the glassful, merely turning purple and stroking his blonde moustache more frequently with his hand.

When she had fed the children and put them to bed Dunya placed a large dish of stewed lamb on the table and whispered to Grigory: "Brother, I'll run and fetch Aksinya; you won't mind, will you?"

Grigory nodded without speaking. All the evening he had been in a state of tense expectation, yet he had felt sure nobody had noticed it. But Dunya had seen him pricking up his ears at every knock, listening and glancing sidelong at the door. That girl's eyes were far too sharp, nothing escaped their attention!

"And that Kuban Cossack Tereshchenko, is he still in command of a troop?" Prokhor asked, keeping a firm grip on his glass, as though afraid someone would take it from him.

"He was killed at Lvov."

"Well, God bless him! He was a good cavalryman." Prokhor hurriedly crossed himself and, not notic-

ing Koshevoi's sarcastic smile, took a pull at his glass.

"And how about that one with the queer name? The one that rode on the right flank—damn it, what was his name, Maiboroda, wasn't it? A Ukrainian, fat and merry, the one who split a Polish officer in two at Brody. Is he alive and well?"

"Like a stallion! He's been transferred to a machine-gun squadron."

"And who did you hand over your horse to?"

"I'd got another by then."

"Then what happened to the one with a star?"

"He was killed by a shell splinter."

"In battle?"

"We were stationed in a small town and were shelled. He was killed at the hitching-post."

"Ah, a pity! What a good horse he was!" Prokhor sighed and again set his lips to the glass.

The latch rattled in the porch. Grigory started. Aksinya crossed the threshold, indistinctly said: "Greetings!" and began to take off her kerchief, breathing fast and keeping her dilated, radiant eyes on Grigory. She came to the table and sat down beside Dunya. Tiny snowflakes were melting on her eyebrows and lashes and on her pale cheeks. Screwing up her eyes, she wiped her face with her palm, sighed deeply, and only then, mastering herself, looked at Grigory, her eyes dark with emotion.

"Fellow-soldier! Aksinya! Together we retreated, together we fed the lice.... Even if we did abandon you in the Kuban, what else were we to do?" Prokhor stretched out his glass, splashing the vodka over the

table. "Drink to Grigory Panteleyevich! Congratulate him on his return. . . . I told you he'd come back safe and sound, and here he is; you can have him for a ruble! Why, he's sitting there, bright as a new pin!"

"He's tight, neighbour, don't listen to him!" Grigory laughed, indicating Prokhor with his eyes.

Aksinya bowed to Grigory and Dunya and only raised her glass a little from the table. She was afraid everybody would notice how her hand was trembling.

"Here's to your arrival, Grigory Panteleyevich, and to your joy, Dunya!"

"And what about you? To your sorrow?" Prokhor burst into a roar and nudged Mikhail in the side.

Aksinya flushed deeply; even the tiny lobes of her ears turned translucently pink. But looking firmly and angrily at Prokhor, she answered:

"And to my joy! My great joy!"

Prokhor was disarmed and touched by such frankness. He cried: "Drink it down, for God's sake, all to the last drop! You know how to talk straight, know how to drink straight! It cuts me to the heart to see anyone leaving good liquor."

Aksinya did not stay long—only so long as she thought proper. And even so she rarely glanced at her beloved, and then only momentarily. She forced herself to look at the others and avoided Grigory's eyes, for she could not pretend to be unconcerned, and she did not wish to reveal her feelings before everybody. Only one glance did Grigory catch as she stood on the threshold, one direct glance filled with love and devotion. But it told him everything. He went to

see her out. The tipsy Prokhor shouted after them: "Don't be long! We'll drink it all up!"

In the porch Grigory, without saying a word, kissed Aksinya on the brow and the lips, and asked: "Well, Aksinya?"

"Oh, I can't tell everything.... Will you come tomorrow?"

"I will."

She hastened home, walking swiftly as though some urgent task were awaiting her there. Only by the door of her hut did she slow her pace, going cautiously up the creaking steps. She wanted as quickly as possible to be alone with her thoughts, with the happiness which had come so unexpectedly.

She threw off her jacket and kerchief and, lighting no light, passed into the best room. Through the unshuttered window the deep lilac glimmer of the night stole into the room. Behind the stove a cricket was chirruping musically. Out of habit Aksinya glanced at the mirror, and although in the darkness she could not see her reflection, nonetheless she tidied her hair, smoothed out the frills of her muslin blouse at the breast, then went across to the window and dropped wearily on the bench.

Many times in her life had her hopes and expectations been unjustified, and that, perhaps, was why constant anxiety came to take the place of her recent joy. What turn would her life take now? What awaited her in the future? And wasn't woman's bitter happiness smiling on her too late?

Worn out with the agitation she had felt all the evening, she sat with her cheek pressed to the cold,

hoar-frosted window-pane, fixing her calm and rather sorrowful gaze on the darkness, which was lightened only very little by the snow.

Grigory sat down at the table, poured himself out a full glass from the ewer, and tossed it off in one gulp.

"Good stuff?" Prokhor asked.

"I can't tell. I haven't drunk for ages."

"It's just like tsarist vodka, by God!" Prokhor said in a tone of conviction, and, swaying, embraced Misha. "You're less of a judge of such matters, Misha, than a calf is of swill. But I know what's what where liquor's concerned. The liquors and wines I've drunk in my time! There's wine which foams out of the bottle like out of a mad dog almost before you've pulled the cork—God knows I'm not lying. In Poland, when we broke through the front and rode with Budyonny to shake up the Poles, we took a certain estate by storm. The house on the estate was a couple or more storeys high, the cattle in the yard were packed horn to horn, there were all sorts of fowl wandering about, there wasn't even room to spit. In a word, that landowner lived like a prince. When our troop dashed into the estate on horseback there were officers feasting with the master—they weren't expecting us. We sabred them all in the orchard and on the stairs, but we took one prisoner. He was an important officer by the look of him, but when we captured him his moustache drooped and he went limp all over with fear. Grigory Panteleyevich had been called urgently to the staff, and we were left in charge. We went into the downstairs

rooms, and there we saw an enormous table. And the stuff that was on it! We stood admiring, but we were afraid to begin, though we were terribly hungry. 'You never know,' we thought, 'it may all be poisoned.' Our prisoner was looking daggers at us. So we ordered him: 'Eat!' and he ate. Not very readily, but he did eat. 'Drink!' And he drank. We made him eat a big helping of every dish, and drink a glass out of every bottle. The devil swelled up before our very eyes with all that food, and there we stood dribbling with spittle. Then we saw that he wasn't dying, and we set to work. We ate and we drank the foaming wine till we were stuffed up to our eyes. Then we noticed that the officer was starting to empty himself at both ends. 'Hell!' we thought; 'we're done for! The serpent has deliberately eaten poisoned food and taken in the lot of us.' We rushed at him with our sabres drawn, but he waved his legs and arms and shouted: 'I've only eaten too much through your kindness; never you fear, the food's all right.' And so we went back to the wine. We tugged at a cork and it flew out as though shot from a gun, and the froth boiled up in a great cloud. That wine made me fall off my horse three times that night. The moment I climbed into my saddle I was sent flying again as though blown clean off by the wind. Now if only I could always drink wine like that, a glass or two on an empty stomach, I'd live to be a hundred. But as things are, is anyone likely to live out his time? Do you call this drink, for instance? It's an infection, not a drink! It's enough to make you turn up your toes before your time!" With a nod

Prokhor indicated the ewer of vodka and poured himself out another glass full to the brim.

Dunya went off to sleep with the children in the best room, and a little later Prokhor also rose. Swaying, he flung his sheepskin coat around his shoulders and said:

"I won't take the ewer. My soul won't allow me to go about with an empty vessel.... When I get home my wife will start laying it on at once. She's a good one for that! Where she gets such filthy expressions from I don't know. I come home after a little drink, and she rants off at me like this: 'You drunken hound, you armless dog, you this, that and the other!' I very quietly and very gently try to make her see reason. I tell her: 'You devilish idiot, you bitch's udder, where did you ever see a drunken hound, and armless at that? Such things don't exist in this world.' I disprove one shameful statement, and she at once makes another; I disprove the second, and she insults me with a third, and so it goes on all night until dawn.... Sometimes I get tired of listening to her and go off into the shed to sleep. But sometimes I come home a little drunk, and if she's silent and doesn't swear at me I can't get to sleep, God's truth! It's just as though I was short of something, I get a kind of itch, I can't sleep, and there's an end of it. And then I touch my spouse and she starts ranting off at me again, until the sparks fly from me. She's got a devil inside her, she has, and I can't do anything about it. Let her carry on, she'll be all the better worker. That's true, isn't it? Well, I'm going; good-

bye! Or shall I spend the night in the stable and not disturb her tonight?"

"Can you get home all right?" Grigory asked with a laugh.

"Like a crab, but I'll get there! Am I not a Cossack, then, Panteleyevich? I'm quite upset to hear you ask such a question."

"Well then, God go with you!"

Grigory saw his friend as far as the wicket-gate. Then he returned to the kitchen.

"Well, shall we have a talk, Mikhail?"

"All right."

They sat face to face, separated by the table, and were silent. At last Grigory said: "There's something between us. I can see by your face that there's something wrong. You're not glad I'm back? Or am I wrong?"

"No, you've guessed right. I'm not glad."

"Why aren't you?"

"Just another worry."

"I intend to feed myself."

"I'm not thinking of that."

"Then what are you thinking of?"

"We are enemies. . . ."

"We were."

"Yes, and it looks as though we shall be still."

"I don't understand. Why shall we?"

"You're unreliable."

"You're right off the mark. You're talking right off the mark."

"No, I'm not. Why have you been demobilized at such a time as this? Will you tell me straight out?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do, but you don't want to say. They didn't trust you—isn't that it?"

"If they hadn't trusted me they wouldn't have put me in command of a squadron."

"That was when you first joined. But as they haven't kept you in the army, the position's quite clear, brother!"

"But do you trust me?" Grigory asked, gazing straight at Misha.

"No! Feed the wolf as much as you like, but he's always hankering after the forest."

"You've drunk too much this evening, Mikhail."

"You can drop that! I'm no more drunk than you are. They didn't trust you there, and they won't put any great trust in you here, get that!"

Grigory was silent. He listlessly took a piece of pickled cucumber from the dish, chewed it, and spat it out.

"Has my wife told you about Kirill Gromov?" Mikhail asked.

"Yes."

"I didn't like his return either. As soon as I heard about it, that very same day...."

Grigory turned pale, and his eyes dilated with fury:

"What am I to you then: Kirill Gromov?"

"Don't shout! In what way are you any better?"

"Well, you know...."

"It's not a question of knowing. We've known everything long since. And supposing Mitka Korshunov turns up—am I to be delighted at that too? No, it

would have been better if you hadn't shown yourself in the village."

"Better for you?"

"Better for me and better for the people—quieter."

"Don't compare me with those others."

"I've already told you, Grigory, and there's no point in getting upset about it: you're no better than they are; in fact, you're worse, you're more dangerous."

"How am I? What are you getting at?"

"They're rank-and-file Cossacks, but you started the rising."

"I didn't start it, I was only commander of a division."

"Isn't that enough?"

"Enough or not, that's not the point. . . . If the Red Army men hadn't planned to kill me that evening, I might not have taken any part in the rising."

"If you hadn't been an officer no one would have touched you."

"If I hadn't been taken for the army I wouldn't have been an officer. . . . That's making a long story of it."

"Both a long and a rotten story."

"In any case it can't be gone over again, now it's past and done!"

They smoked in silence. Knocking the ash off his cigarette with his nail, Koshevoi said: "I know all about your heroism, I've heard about it. You killed a lot of our men, and that doesn't make it easy for me to have you in my sight. . . . That's not to be forgotten in a hurry!"

Grigory laughed sarcastically.

"You've got a good memory! You killed my brother Pyotr. But I don't bother to remind you of that. . . . If we're going to remember everything, we'll have to live like wolves."

"Well, I did kill him, I don't deny it. And if I'd had the luck to catch you that time I'd have stretched you out nicely too!"

"But I, when they took Ivan Alexeyevich prisoner at Ust-Khoperskaya, I hurried home because I was afraid you might be among them; I was afraid the Cossacks would kill you. . . . It looks as if I was in too much of a hurry that time."

"Wasn't that noble of you! I can imagine how you'd have talked to me if you'd won. You'd have torn my back to ribbons, I expect. It's only now that you're turning so kind. . . ."

"Maybe others would have, but I wouldn't have soiled my hands on you."

"Then you and I are made differently. . . . I've never been afraid of soiling my hands on enemies, and I shan't turn a hair now if the need arises. . . ." Mikhail poured the rest of the vodka into the glasses and asked: "Will you drink?"

"All right; we've grown a bit too sober for a talk like this. . . ."

They clinked glasses in silence and drank. Grigory leaned forward over the table and, twisting his moustache, scanned Mikhail through half-closed eyes.

"But what is it you're afraid of, Mikhail? That I shall revolt against the Soviet regime again?"

"I'm not afraid of anything, but what I do think is that if something happens you'll be slipping across to the other side again."

"I could have done that with the Poles, don't you think? We had a whole regiment go over to them."

"Couldn't you manage it?"

"It wasn't that; I just didn't want to. I've served my time. I don't want to serve anybody any more. I've fought more than enough for my age, and I'm absolutely worn out. I'm fed up with everything, with the Revolution and with the counter-revolution. Let all that—let it all go to hell! I want to live the rest of my life with my children, to return to the farm, that's all. Believe me, Mikhail, I say that from the bottom of my heart!"

But no assurance whatever could convince Mikhail. Grigory realized that and said no more. He felt a momentary bitter annoyance with himself. What the devil had he tried to justify himself for, tried to prove anything for? What was the point of carrying on this drunken conversation and listening to Mikhail's idiotic sermons? To hell with it all! He rose.

"We won't go on with this useless talk. I've had enough! There's one last thing I want to say to you: I shan't do anything against the regime so long as it doesn't seize me by the throat. But if it does, I shall defend myself! In any case I'm not going to yield up my head over the rising, as Platon Ryabchikov has."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. Let them take account of my service in the Red Army and the wounds I got as the result.

I'm prepared to go to prison for the rising, but if it's a case of being shot for it, then you'll have to excuse me! That'll be asking too much!"

Mikhail laughed contemptuously. "You've got a fine idea into your head! The Revolutionary Tribunal or the Cheka won't ask you what you want and what you don't want, and they won't strike any bargain with you. Once you've been found guilty, you receive your ration and all the make weight! The old debts have got to be paid off in full."

"We'll see about that."

"Of course we shall."

Grigory took off his belt and shirt and, grunting, began to remove his boots.

"Are we going to share this place?" he asked, examining the broken sole of his boot with exaggerated attention.

"It won't take long to decide that: I'll get my place in order and move at once."

"Yes, let's keep away from each other. We shan't get on together."

"No, we shan't," Mikhail assented.

"Well, I didn't think you had an opinion like this of me. . . . Still, I suppose. . . ."

"I've told you straight. I spoke my mind. When are you going to Vyeshenskaya?"

"One day soon."

"That's not good enough. You've got to go tomorrow."

"I've just walked forty versts and I'm tired out. I'll have a rest tomorrow and go and get registered the day after."

"The order says registration at once. Go tomorrow."

"I've got to have one day's rest, haven't I? I shan't run away."

"The devil knows what you may do. I don't want to be responsible for you."

"What a swine you've grown, Mikhail!" Grigory said, regarding the hard-set face of his former friend with some surprise.

"Don't 'swine' me! I'm not used to it..." Mikhail drew a quick breath and raised his voice. "You'd better drop those officer's habits! Get going tomorrow, and if you don't go quietly, I'll send you there under guard. Get me?"

"Yes, I get it all now..." Grigory regarded Mikhail's back with hatred as he went out of the room, then lay down on his bed without bothering to undress.

Well, everything had happened as it was bound to happen. What other treatment was he, Grigory, to have expected on his arrival? Why should he have thought that his brief honourable service in the Red Army would atone for all his past sins? And perhaps Mikhail was right when he said that not everything would be forgiven, and that the old debts would have to be repaid in full.

In his sleep Grigory saw the open steppe, and a regiment deployed for attack. Just as from somewhere in the distance came the long-drawn-out command: "Squad-ron!" he realized that his saddle-girths were not tightened under his horse. He put all the weight of his body on the left stirrup—his saddle slipped away under him. Possessed with a feeling of shame and fear, he leaped from his horse to tighten the

saddle-girths and at that moment heard the momentarily increasing and then swiftly decreasing thunder of hoofs. The regiment had galloped into the attack without him.

He turned over, and, awakening, caught the sound of his own hoarse groan.

Outside the window day was just beginning to appear. The wind must have opened the shutter during the night, and through the hoar-frosted glass he could see the gleaming green disk of the waning moon. He groped for his pouch and lit a cigarette. His heart was still pounding hollowly and swiftly. He lay on his back and smiled. What a devilish stupid dream to have! Being left out of a fight! In that early morning hour it did not occur to him that he would yet go into the attack more than once not only in his dreams but in his waking hours.

VII

Dunya got up early, she had to milk the cow. Grigory was walking quietly about the kitchen, coughing. Drawing the blanket over the children, Dunya swiftly dressed and went into the kitchen. She found her brother buttoning his greatcoat.

"Where are you off to so early, Brother?"

"I'm going for a walk through the village, just to have a look round."

"You should have some breakfast first. . . ."

"I don't want any; I've got a headache."

"Will you be back by breakfast-time? I'm just going to light the stove."

"You needn't wait for me; I shan't be back for some time."

Grigory went out into the street. Towards morning a gentle thaw had set in. The wind blowing from the south was moist and warm. Snow mingled with earth clung to the heels of his boots. As he walked slowly towards the centre of the village he attentively examined the houses and sheds he had known since childhood, as though he were in a strange locality. The charred ruins of the merchants' houses and shops burned down by Koshevoi the previous year showed black in the square, gaps yawned in the half-demolished wall of the church. "The bricks have come in useful for stoves," Grigory thought unconcernedly. The church stood as of old, small, huddling into the ground. Its long unpainted roof was gilded with rust, its walls were stained brown with damp, and where the plaster had fallen away the bare brick showed a bright, fresh red.

The streets were deserted. Two or three sleepy-eyed women passed him not far from the well. They bowed silently to him as though he were a stranger, and only when he had passed did they halt and stand staring after him.

He turned back. "I ought to go to the graveyard, to visit Mother and Natalya," he thought, and walked along a lane leading in the direction of the cemetery. But after going a little distance he halted. His heart was heavy and sorrowful enough without that. "I'll go some other time," he decided, turning to make his way to Prokhor's house. "It's all the same to them whether I come or not. They're at peace now. It's all over for them. Their graves are sprinkled with

snow. But the earth must be cold down inside there. . . . Well, they lived their time, and so quickly, like a dream. There they all lie together, side by side: my wife, and Mother, and Pyotr and Darya. . . . The whole family has crossed over and lie there side by side. They're well off there, only Father is lying in a strange country. He must find it dreary among strangers. . . ." Grigory no longer looked about him, but walked along gazing down at his feet, at the white, slightly damp, thawing snow, which was very soft, so soft that one did not even feel it underfoot as it yielded with scarcely a crunch.

Then his thoughts turned to his children. They had grown strangely reserved, taciturn for their years, not as they had been when their mother was alive. Death had taken too much from them. They were frightened. Why had Polyushka broken into tears yesterday when she saw him? Children don't usually cry when they meet anyone; it was not like them. What had she been thinking about? And why did fear flash in her eyes when he took her in his arms? Maybe all this time she had been thinking her father was dead and would never come back any more, and then when she saw him she had been afraid? In any case, he had no reason to reproach himself in regard to them. But he must tell Aksinya to be kind to them and to try to take their mother's place as far as she could. . . . Maybe they would grow attached to their stepmother. She was a good, kind woman. In her love for him she would love the children too.

He found this subject also painful and bitter to think about. It was not so simple as all that. Life

itself was proving to be not so simple as it had seemed to him only recently. In his stupid, childish simplicity he had assumed that he had only to return home, to change his greatcoat for a peasant's coat, and everything would go smoothly; no one would say a word to him, nobody would reproach him, everything would settle down of itself, and he would live and end his days as a peaceable grain-grower and a model family man. But no, the reality didn't look quite so simple.

He cautiously opened Zykov's wicket-gate, which was hanging by one hinge. Wearing well-patched, huge felt boots and a three-cornered cap drawn right down over his eyes, Prokhor was walking towards the steps, jauntily swinging an empty milk-pail. White drops of milk sprinkled invisibly over the snow.

"Had a good night, Comrade Commander?" he greeted Grigory.

"Praise be!"

"We ought to have a drop for the morning after, my head feels as empty as this pail here."

"It's a good idea, but why is the pail empty? Have you been milking the cow yourself?"

With a nod Prokhor shifted his cap to the back of his head, and only then did Grigory notice that his friend's face was unusually gloomy.

"Well, is the devil going to milk her for me? Yes, I've milked her, for my blasted woman! I only hope she gets a belly-ache as the result." Prokhor furiously flung away the pail and said curtly: "Let's go inside!"

"How about your wife?" Grigory asked irresolutely.

"The devils have eaten her with kvass! At some unearthly hour she raked herself together and drove

off to Kruzhilinsky to gather sloes. She set about me as soon as I got home last night. She lectured me and gave me further orders, and then she jumped up: 'I'm going off to pick some sloes. Maksayev's daughters-in-law are going today, and I'll go with them.' 'Go by all means,' I thought, 'go for pears if you like, and good riddance!' I got up, lit the stove, and went to milk the cow. I milked her all right! Do you think a man's capable of doing such things with only one arm?"

"You should have asked some woman to do it for you, you chump!"

"A sheep's a chump, it'll suck at its mother until the Feast of the Blessed Virgin; but all my life I've never been a chump. I thought I'd manage it by myself. Well, and I did. I got down under that cow on my haunches; but, damn her, she wouldn't stand still, kept shifting about all the time. I even took my cap off so as not to scare her, but it made no difference. My shirt got wet through with sweat while I was milking her, and I had hardly stretched out my hand to take the pail from under her when she let fly. The pail went one way and I the other. And that's how I milked her. She's not a cow, she's a devil with horns! I spat in her face and left her. I can do without milk. Shall we have a drink?"

"Have you got any?"

"One bottle. I've been saving it up."

"Well, it'll be enough."

"Come in, be my guest. Shall I fry you some eggs? I can get them ready in two seconds."

Grigory cut up some bacon-fat and helped Prokhor to get the fire going at the front of the stove. They watched without talking as the pieces of rosy fat hissed, melted, and slipped about the frying-pan. Then Prokhor drew out a dusty bottle from behind the icon.

"That's where I keep all my secrets from my wife," he explained briefly.

They ate in the small, well-heated best room, drank, and talked in undertones.

With whom could Grigory share his most secret thoughts if not with Prokhor? He sat at the table, his long, muscular legs spread wide apart, and his hoarse deep voice sounded husky.

"While I was in the army and all the way home I thought of how I'd live close to the earth, and rest among my family from all the devilish business of war. It's no joke not to have got off your horse for seven years, so to speak. Even in your dreams and almost every night you dream of all that glory: either you're killing someone, or they're killing you. . . . But now I can see, Prokhor, that it's not going to turn out as I thought. . . . I can see that others, not I, are going to plough the land and care for it. . . ."

"Did you have a talk with Mikhail yesterday?"

"I had that honeyed pleasure!"

"And what did he say?"

Grigory crossed his two forefingers like a pair of swords.

"That's the state of our friendship. He's throwing my service with the Whites up in my face; he thinks I'm nursing a grudge against the new regime, hiding a knife against it in my breast. He's afraid there'll be

a rising, but what the devil I want it for he himself doesn't know, the fool!"

"He said the same thing to me."

Grigory smiled cheerlessly.

"During our advance on Poland we came across a Ukrainian who asked us for arms to defend his village. Bandits had plundered their place, and slaughtered their cattle. The commander of our regiment—I was present at the time—said: 'Give you arms and you'll go off to the bandits yourselves!' But the Ukrainian laughed and said: 'You just arm us, Comrade, and then we'll keep the bandits out of the village, and you too.' And just now I'm thinking rather like that Ukrainian: if only it was possible to have neither Whites nor Reds in Tatarsky, it would be much better. In my view my kinsman Mitka Korshunov, say, and Mikhail Koshevoi are both tarred with the same brush. Mikhail thinks I'm so devoted to the Whites that I can't live without them. The horse-radish! I'm devoted to them all right! Not long ago when we were advancing into the Crimea, I happened to run up against a Kornilov officer in a fight—a natty little colonel, with his moustache trimmed English-fashion, two streaks like snot under his nose. And I tackled him with such fervour that my heart leaped for joy! I left that poor little colonel with half his cap and half his head on his shoulders, and his officer's white cockade went flying.... That's how much I'm devoted to them! They, too, have given me enough trouble in life. With my own blood I earned my way to that accursed officer's rank, but among the officers I was like a white crow. The swine, they never regarded me as

a man, they scorned giving me their hands; and do you think that after that—They can go to hell! It makes me sick even to talk about it. And to say that I should want to bring their rule back! To invite the General Fitshalaurovs here! I've tried that game once, and I was hiccuping for a whole year after. I've had enough, I've learned my lesson, I've felt it all on my own back."

As he soaked his bread in the hot fat, Prokhor said: "There isn't going to be any rising. To begin with, there are only a few Cossacks left, and those who've come through have also learned their lesson. Our brothers have lost a good lot of blood and they've got so wise and peaceful you couldn't drag them into a rising with a rope round their necks. Besides, the people have grown hungry for a peaceful life. You should have seen how everybody worked this summer: they piled great stacks of hay, and harvested all the corn down to the last grain. They're groaning with the effort, but they're ploughing and sowing as though every one of them intended to live a hundred years. No, there's no point in talking about a rising. It's stupid talking about it. Though the devil knows what the Cossacks may get into their heads next."

"What can they get into their heads? What are you hinting at?"

"Neighbours of ours have got it into their heads. . . ."

"Well?"

"Call it 'well' if you like! A rising has broken out in Voronezh Province, somewhere beyond Boguchar."

"That's all rot!"

"No, it isn't. A militiaman I know told me about

it yesterday. It seems the authorities are intending to send the militia there."

"But where's 'there'?"

"Monastyrshchina, Sukhoi Donets, Paseka, Staraya and Novaya Kalitva and elsewhere in that district. They say it's quite a big rising."

"Why didn't you say anything about it yesterday, you plucked goose?"

"I didn't want to in front of Mikhail, and besides, there's no pleasure in talking about such things. I never want to hear another word about that sort of thing."

Grigory looked glum. After long reflection he said: "That's bad news."

"It's nothing to do with you. Let the khokhols worry about it. They'll have their arses beaten into sores, and then they'll learn how to rise. But it's nothing whatever to do with you and me. I don't feel at all sorry for them."

"It'll make things difficult for me, though."

"Why will it?"

"Can't you see? If the regional authorities have the same opinion of me as Koshevoi, then I shan't be able to avoid gaol. A rising in the next province, and me a former officer, and an insurgent into the bargain. . . . Now do you see?"

Prokhor stopped chewing and lapsed into thought. This aspect had not occurred to him before. His head was fuddled with drink, and he thought slowly and painfully.

"But where do you come in, Panteleyevich?" he asked in wonder.

Grigory knitted his brows in his vexation and did not answer. He was obviously disturbed by the news. Prokhor was about to pass his glass across to him, but he pushed his friend's hand away and said resolutely: "I'm not having any more."

"But won't you have just one more? Drink till you turn black! The only way of stifling this joyful life is with vodka."

"Turn black by yourself. Your head's stupid enough already, it'll be the death of you sooner or later. I've got to go to Vyeshenskaya today, to register."

Prokhor gazed fixedly at him. Grigory's sunburnt and weather-beaten face burned with a deep brown flush, his skin was a dull white only at the very roots of the hair combed back off his forehead. He was calm enough, this soldier who had seen so much, with whom war and adversity had made Prokhor kin. His slightly puffy eyes had a morose gaze, a look of harsh weariness.

"You aren't afraid they'll put you in prison?" Prokhor asked.

Grigory answered quickly: "That's just what I am afraid of, my lad! I never have been in prison, and I fear prisons more than death. But it looks as though I've got to experience that happiness too."

"You shouldn't have come home," Prokhor said commiseratingly.

"But where else was I to go?"

"You should have hidden somewhere in a town and waited till all this business had settled down, and then come home."

Grigory waved his hand and laughed.

"That's not my way. There's nothing worse than waiting about and having to catch up. And how could I leave the children?"

"A fine idea! Haven't they lived without you already? You could have taken them later, and your darling too. And, by the way, I forgot to tell you. Your old masters, the ones you and Aksinya worked for before the war, have both gone."

"The Listnitskys?"

"That's the name. My kinsman Zakhar retreated as orderly to the younger Listnitsky, and he told me the old man died of typhus at Morozovsky, but the younger got as far as Yekaterinodar; and there his wife had an affair with General Pokrovsky, and he couldn't stand it, so he shot himself in his temper."

"Well, they can go to the devil!" Grigory said unconcernedly. "I'm sorry for the good men that have been lost, but nobody's going to be sorry for those two." He rose, put on his greatcoat, and, as he held the door-handle, said reflectively: "Though, damn it, I always felt envious of men like the younger Listnitsky or our Koshevoi. . . . Everything was clear to them from the very beginning, but nothing is clear to me even now. Both of them saw straight roads before them and saw the ends of them; but ever since 1917 I've been going round and round in a circle, reeling like a drunken man. I broke away from the Whites, but I didn't join up with the Reds, and I float like dung in a hole in the ice. . . . You see, Prokhor, of course I ought to have stuck to the Red Army all through; maybe then everything would have gone well for me. And at first, you know, I served the

Soviet Government with all my heart; but afterwards everything went wrong. I was a stranger among the Whites, among their command; they always suspected me. And how could it be otherwise? The son of a farmer, an illiterate Cossack—what kinship had I with them? They just didn't trust me! And afterwards it was just the same with the Reds. After all, I'm not blind, I saw how the commissar and the Communists in the squadron watched me. . . . During a battle they didn't take their eyes off me, they watched my every step, and I suppose they were thinking: 'Ah, that swine, the former White, the Cossack officer, we must see he doesn't betray us!' And when I noticed it my heart ran cold. Towards the end I couldn't stand their distrust any longer. After all, even a stone will split with heat. And it was a good job they did demobilize me. It brought the end nearer." He cleared his throat huskily, said nothing for a moment, and then, not looking at Prokhor, went on in a changed tone: "Thanks for the meal. I'm off now. Keep well. If I come back, I'll drop in towards evening. Clear that bottle away, if your wife comes home she'll break a frying-pan over your back."

Prokhor accompanied him to the steps and whispered in the porch: "Ah, Panteleyevich, see they don't fix you there!"

"I will!" Grigory answered in a reserved tone.

He did not go home, but dropped down to the river, untied someone's boat from the landing-stage, bailed the water out with his palms, then pulled a stake out of the fence, broke a channel through the shore ice, and rowed to the farther side.

Dark-green, wind-lashed waves were rolling westward along the Don. In the quiet water by the banks they broke away the fragile, transparent ice and sent the emerald strands of water-weed swaying. Over the banks hung the crystal tinkle of breaking ice, and the river-side shingle hissed softly as it was washed by the water; but in the middle of the river, where the current was swift and steady, Grigory heard only the muffled splash and seething of waves piling against the left side of the boat, and the low, deep, incessant roar of the wind in the Don-side forest.

He dragged the boat half out of the water, then squatted down, removed his boots, and carefully rewound his foot-cloths to make walking easier.

He arrived at Vyeshenskaya towards midday.

The regional Military Commissariat was crowded and noisy. Telephone bells were ringing sharply, doors were slammed, armed men went in and out, the dry rattle of typewriters came from various rooms. In the corridor a couple of dozen Red Army men stood surrounding a stocky little man dressed in a flounced sheepskin jacket, talking and interrupting one another excitedly, and roaring with laughter. As Grigory walked along the corridor, two Red Army men wheeled out a machine-gun from a room beyond. Its small wheels clattered softly on the uneven wooden floor. One of the gunners, a tall, burly fellow, jokingly shouted: "Now, then, out of the way, punishment company, or I'll roll you flat!"

"It looks as if they're really going off to suppress a rising," Grigory thought.

He was not detained long over the registration.

After hurriedly noting his papers, the secretary of the Military Commissariat said: "Go to the political department of the Don Cheka. As a former officer you'll have to report to them."

"Very well." Grigory saluted, in no way betraying the agitation which had gripped him.

In the square he halted irresolutely. He ought to go to the political department, but all his being was resisting violently. "They'll clap you in gaol!" an inward voice told him, and he shivered with fear and loathing. He stood by the school fence, gazing with unseeing eyes at the dunged earth and saw himself with bound arms, descending a dirty ladder into a cellar, and behind him a man firmly clutching the rough butt of a pistol. He clenched his fists and stared at the swollen blue veins of his hands. And they would bind those hands? The blood rushed to his face. No, he would not go there today! Tomorrow, if you liked, but today he would go back to the village, he would spend this day with his children, he would see Aksinya and return to Vyeshenskaya tomorrow. Let his feet ache with so much walking! He would go home for just one day and then return here—of course he would return. Anything tomorrow, but not today.

"Ah, Melekhov! It's ages, ages. . . ."

Grigory turned. Yakov Fomin, Pyotr's regimental comrade, former commander of the insurgent 28th Regiment of the Don Army, came up to him.

Fomin was no longer the awkwardly and carelessly dressed Cossack of the Ataman Regiment whom Grigory had once known. In two years he had changed amazingly; his well-cut cavalry greatcoat fitted him

neatly, his red moustache had a saucy twist in it, and everything about him, the exaggeratedly swaggering gait, the self-satisfied smile, revealed a consciousness of his superiority and distinction.

"What brings you here?" he asked, shaking Grigory's hand, staring into his eyes with his own wide-set blue eyes.

"I've been demobilized. I've just been to the Military Commissariat."

"Been back some time?"

"Arrived yesterday."

"I often recall your brother Pyotr Panteleyevich. He was a good Cossack, but his death was a pity. We were bosom pals. You ought not to have joined the uprising last year, Melekhov. You made a mistake."

Grigory felt bound to say something, and he said: "Yes. The Cossacks made a mistake. . . ."

"What force were you in?"

"The First Cavalry Brigade."

"What as?"

"Squadron commander."

"Is that so! I'm in command of a squadron too, now. We've got a defensive force here at Vyeshenskaya." He looked about him and, lowering his voice, suggested: "Listen, let's move on. Walk a little way with me. There are too many people here, and we won't get a chance of talking."

They walked along the street. Looking out of the corner of his eye at Grigory, Fomin asked: "Are you thinking of living at home?"

"Where else should I live? Of course."

"Farming?"

"Yes."

Fomin commiseratively shook his head and sighed. "You've chosen a bad time, Melekhov, very bad.... You shouldn't have come back for a year or even two yet."

"Why not?"

Taking Grigory by the elbow and bending slightly towards him, Fomin whispered: "There's trouble in the region. The Cossacks are very sore about the food-requisitioning. There's a rising in the Boguchar District. We're starting out today to put it down. You'd be well advised to slip away from here, young man, and quickly! Pyotr and I were great friends, that's why I'm advising you to clear out."

"I've got nowhere to clear out to."

"Well, watch out! I'm telling you this because the political department is beginning to arrest the former officers. Only this week three ensigns from Dudarevka and one from Reshetovka have been brought in, and they're being brought in in droves from the other side of the Don, and they're even beginning to put the screw on rank-and-file Cossacks. Draw your own conclusions, Grigory Panteleyevich."

"Thank you for the advice, but I'm not clearing out all the same," Grigory said stubbornly.

"Well, that's your business."

Fomin turned to talking of the situation in the region, of his relations with the regional authorities and the regional military commissar, Shakhayev. Deep in his own thoughts, Grigory listened to him inattentively. They walked along for three blocks, then Fomin halted.

"I've got a call to make. So long." Putting his hand to his fur cap, he saluted and took a chilly leave of Grigory and went down a side-turning, his new belt-straps creaking, carrying himself erect and with absurd dignity. Grigory followed him with his eyes, then turned back.

As he went up the stone steps of the political department he thought: "If this is the end, then the sooner the better. There's no point in dragging it out. You knew how to do harm, Grigory; now know how to answer for it!"

VIII

About eight in the morning Aksinya raked together the coals in the stove and sat down on the bench, wiping her flushed, sweaty face with her apron. She had risen before dawn, in order to be free of cooking as early as possible; she had boiled a chicken broth with noodles, had made pancakes, had poured cream liberally over small dumplings, and had put them on to fry. She knew Grigory was fond of fried dumplings, and she had prepared this festive meal in the hope that her beloved would dine with her.

She very much wanted to go along to the Melekhovs' under some pretext, just to spend a minute there, to have just a peep at Grigory. It seemed quite impossible that he should be there, next door, and she not see him. Yet she mastered her desire and did not go. After all, she was not a girl. At her age there was no point in behaving frivolously.

She washed her face and hands more carefully than usual, put on a clean shirt and a new embroidered underskirt. For a long time she stood irresolutely before the open chest. Now she had to decide what she should wear. It was hardly the thing to dress herself in her best on a work-day, yet she did not want to stay in her simple working-clothes. Not knowing what to choose, she knitted her brows and carelessly turned over the ironed skirts. Finally she resolutely picked up a dark-blue skirt and an almost unworn blue bodice trimmed with black lace. It was the best she possessed. After all, did it matter what the neighbours thought? Let today be a work-day for them; for her it was a holiday. She hurriedly dressed herself in her finery and went across to the mirror. A faint, astonished smile glided over her lips; youthful, sparkling eyes gazed at her curiously and merrily. She examined her face closely, severely, then sighed with relief. No, her beauty had not faded. More than one Cossack yet would halt when he met her and would watch with flaming eyes as she went by!

As she adjusted her skirt before the mirror she said aloud: "Well, Grigory Panteleyevich, now look out!" Feeling that she was blushing, she broke into quiet, suppressed laughter. Even so she did not fail to find several grey hairs at her temples, and pulled them out. Grigory must not see anything that would remind him of her age. For him she wanted to be as young today as she had been seven years before.

She managed somehow to stay at home until dinner-time, but then could restrain herself no longer and, throwing a shawl of white goat's wool around her

shoulders, went along to the Melekhovs'. Dunya was alone in the house. Aksinya greeted her and asked: "You haven't had dinner yet, have you?"

"Have dinner on time with such stay-outs? My husband's at the Soviet, and Grigory's gone off to Vyeshenskaya. I've already fed the children, and now I'm waiting for the grown-ups!"

Outwardly calm, by neither movement nor word betraying the disappointment she felt, Aksinya said:

"And I thought you'd all be at home. And when will Grisha—Grigory Panteleyevich be back? Today?"

Dunya ran a swift glance over her neighbour in her finery and said reluctantly: "He's gone off to register."

"When did he expect to be back?"

Tears glittered in Dunya's eyes. With reproach in her stammering voice she said: "You've chosen a fine time—to dress yourself up. . . . But you don't know—that he mayn't come back at all. . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"Mikhail says he'll be arrested at Vyeshenskaya. . . ." Dunya began to weep meagre, angry tears. Wiping her eyes with her sleeve, she cried: "Curse it! Curse this life! When will it all end? He went off, and the children—you'd say they'd gone mad, they wouldn't give me a minute's peace: 'Where's Daddy gone and when is he coming back?' And how am I to know? I sent them out into the yard, but my own heart is aching. . . . What do you call this accursed life? There's never any peace for anyone, though you scream your lungs out for it!"

"If he doesn't get back by the evening I'll go to Vyeshenskaya tomorrow and find out." Aksinya said these words in such an unconcerned tone that she might have been talking of something quite commonplace which did not call for the least agitation.

Amazed at her calm, Dunya said with a sigh: "It's no good expecting him now, that's clear. He's come back to a lot of trouble!"

"We don't know anything at all yet. Now do stop crying, or the children will start thinking things. Good-bye!"

Grigory returned late that evening. He spent a little time in the house, then went to see Aksinya.

The anxiety in which she had lived all that long day somewhat blunted the joy of the meeting. By the evening she felt as though she had been at work all day without once straightening her back. Depressed and weary with expectation, she had lain down on the bed and was dozing. But, hearing footsteps outside the window, she jumped up nimbly as a girl.

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to Vyeshenskaya?" she asked, putting her arms around Grigory and unbuttoning his greatcoat.

"I didn't have a chance to say; I was in a hurry."

"Dunya and I have been crying our eyes out by ourselves because we thought you wouldn't be coming back."

Grigory smiled wanly.

"No, it isn't as bad as that." After a pause he added: "Not yet at least."

He limped to the table and sat down. The best room, the broad wooden bed in one corner, a chest with

its copper bindings dully glittering, was visible through the open door. Everything was as it had been in those days when as a youngster he had called while Stepan was out. He could see hardly any change; it was as though time had gone past this place and had not glanced inside. Even the old smell remained, the yeasty smell of fresh hops, of scrubbed floors, and a very faint, almost imperceptible scent of withered thyme. It was all as though he had left it at dawn only the other day. Yet in reality how long ago it was. . . !

He suppressed a sigh and deliberately began to roll himself a cigarette. But for some reason his hands shook, and he spilled the tobacco over his knees.

Aksinya hurriedly laid the table. The cold noodles had to be warmed up. She ran to the shed for firewood and, panting and rather pale, began to build up the fire in the stove. She blew on the embers sending the sparks flying, yet she managed to take a look at the huddled, silently smoking Grigory:

"How did your affairs go? Did you settle everything?"

"Everything went well."

"Why did Dunya get it into her head that they were sure to arrest you? She gave me a terrible fright too."

Grigory frowned and threw his cigarette away with a gesture of irritation.

"Mikhail's been blowing in her ear! He's the one who's making it all up and calling down trouble on my head."

Aksinya went to the table. He took her by the hands.

"But you know," he said, looking up into her eyes, "my affairs aren't in too good a way. As I went into

the political department I myself thought I wouldn't be coming out again. There's no denying it, I did command a division during the rising, and I was a squadron commander. Such as me are taken up at once."

"But what did they say to you?"

"They gave me a form to fill in, and I had to tell all I had done during my service. But I'm not much of a hand with the pen. I haven't had to do much writing in my time, and I sat there a couple of hours describing all my past. Then two others came into the room and asked all about the rising. They were all right, quite friendly. The older man asked me: 'Would you like some tea? Only you'll have to have it with saccharine.' 'What do I want tea for,' I thought. 'So long as my legs get me away from you whole!'" He was silent for a moment, then added contemptuously, as though speaking of some outsider: "I proved to be rather watery when it came to settling accounts. I was a bit of a coward."

He was angry with himself for having shown cowardice at Vyeshenskaya and for not having the strength to fight the fear which had possessed him. He was doubly annoyed because his fears had proved groundless. Now all his agitation seemed absurd and shameful. His mind had run on this subject all the way back, and maybe that was why he told Aksinya all about it, laughing at himself and a little exaggerating what he had gone through.

Aksinya listened to him attentively, then gently released her hands and went across to the stove. As she made up the fire she asked: "But how about the future?"

"I've got to go and report there again in a week's time."

"Do you think they'll take you after all?"

"It seems like it. Sooner or later they'll take me."

"Then what are we to do? How shall we live, Grisha?"

"I don't know. Let's talk about that later. Have you got any water I can wash with?"

They sat down to supper, and once more that full-weighted happiness which she had felt in the morning returned to Aksinya. Grigory was here, at her side; she could look at him without having to avert her eyes, without having to think that outsiders were noticing her glances; her eyes could say all without concealment and without embarrassment. Lord, how she had longed for him, how she had worn herself out, how her body had yearned for his great, ungracious hands! She hardly touched the food; leaning a little forward, she watched as Grigory ate hungrily, her misted eyes caressing his face, his swarthy neck tightly gripped by the high collar of his tunic, his broad shoulders, his hands lying heavily on the table. She avidly breathed in the mingled scent of tart masculine sweat and tobacco which came from him, the familiar and precious scent that was his alone. With eyes blindfolded she could have distinguished her Grigory from a thousand other men even by his scent. A deep flush burned on her cheeks, her heart beat fast and heavily. This evening she could not be a really attentive housewife, for she saw nothing but Grigory all around her. But he did not demand attention: he cut his own bread, looked for and found the salt-cel-

lar on the stove, helped himself to a second plate of noodles.

"I'm as hungry as a dog," he said with a smile, as though excusing himself. "I've eaten nothing since morning."

Only then did Aksinya recall her domestic duties; she jumped up hurriedly.

"Oh, what a head I've got! I've forgotten the dumplings and the pancakes. Have some chicken, do! Eat lots more, my darling. I'll have everything on the table in a moment."

But how long and methodically he ate! As though he had had no food for a week! He certainly needed no urging. She waited patiently, but at last she could wait no longer. She sat down beside him; with her left hand she drew his head to her, with her right she took the clean, embroidered hand-towel and herself wiped her beloved's greasy lips and chin. Then, holding her breath, closing her eyes so that tiny orange sparks spurted from them in the darkness, she pressed her lips strongly against his.

Indeed it takes very little to make man happy. At any rate, Aksinya was happy that evening.

IX

Grigory could not endure meeting Koshevoi. Their relations had been determined on the first day of Grigory's return, and there was nothing more to talk about, nor any point in talking. Probably Mikhail got no pleasure either from seeing Grigory. He hired two carpenters, and they hurriedly repaired his small hut;

they renewed the half-rotten rafters of the roof, took to pieces and rebuilt one of the tottering walls, fashioned new lintels, frames, and doors.

After his return from Vyeshenskaya, Grigory went to the village Revolutionary Committee, handed Koshvoi his documents, certified by the Military Commissariat, and left again without a word of farewell. He went to live with Aksinya, taking the children and some of his possessions with him. As Dunya saw him off to his new home, she burst into tears.

"Brother dear, don't be angry with me. I've done you no wrong," she said, gazing imploringly at him.

"Why should I be angry, Dunya? Of course, I'm not," he soothed her. "Come and see us sometimes. I'm the only one of the family left to you, I've always been fond of you and I'm still fond of you.... But your husband—that's different. You and I shan't drop our friendship."

"We'll be leaving the house soon. Don't be annoyed."

"Why should you," Grigory said in a vexed tone. "Stay in the house until spring at any rate. You're no trouble to me, and there's room enough for me and the children with Aksinya."

"Are you going to marry her, Grisha?"

"There's plenty of time for that," Grigory said indefinitely.

"You marry her, Brother, she's a good woman," Dunya said decisively. "Our dead mother said she was the only wife for you. She came to love her towards the end and often went to see her before she died."

"It sounds as if you're trying to persuade me!" Grigory said with a smile. "Who else should I marry, if not her? Not old crone Andronikha, surely?"

Andronikha was the most ancient beldam in Tatarsky. She had long passed her century. As Dunya recalled her tiny doubled-up figure she burst into a laugh.

"The things you say, Brother! I was only asking. You never talk about it, that's why I asked you."

"Who ever else I ask, I shall invite you to the wedding." Grigory jokingly clapped his sister on her back and left his old home with a light heart.

To tell the truth he was quite unconcerned where he lived, so long as he could live in peace. But peace was the one thing he could not find. He spent several days in an oppressive idleness. He tried to tackle one or two jobs on Aksinya's farm, but at once felt that he could do nothing. He had no inclination for anything. The repressive uncertainty of his position tormented him, prevented him from living; not for a minute did he forget that he might be arrested and, at best, thrown into prison, and that he might even be shot.

Aksinya would wake up in the middle of the night and find him wide awake. Usually he was lying on his back, his hands behind his head, staring into the darkness, and his eyes were cold and hard. Aksinya knew what he was thinking about. There was no way in which she could help him. She herself suffered as she saw how painful it was for him, and guessed that her hopes of life with him were again receding into the distance. She did not question him about anything. Let him decide it all for himself. Only once, one night,

when she awoke and saw the livid glow of a cigarette beside her, did she say: "Grisha, you never sleep. Perhaps you'd better leave the village for the time being. Or perhaps we could go off somewhere and hide."

He covered her legs fondly with the blanket and answered reluctantly: "I'll think about it. You sleep."

"And we could come back later on, when everything had quieted down here, couldn't we?"

He again replied indefinitely, as though he had made no decision whatever.

"We'll see how things go. You sleep, Aksinya." He cautiously and gently pressed his lips to her bare, silkily cool shoulder.

But in reality he had already made a decision: he would not go to Vyeshenskaya again. The man who had received him last time at the political department would wait for him in vain. He had sat behind his table, his greatcoat flung across his shoulders, stretching himself with a cracking of joints and yawning artificially as he listened to Grigory's story of the rising. Well, he would hear no more. The story was told.

The day Grigory was due to go to the political department he would clear out of the village. If necessary, for a long time. Where to, he himself did not know, but he had firmly resolved to clear out. He had no desire either to die or to go to prison. He had made his choice, but he did not want to talk about it prematurely to Aksinya. There was no point in poisoning her last few days with him—as it was, they were not so very cheerful. He must speak about it on the last day, he had decided. But now let her sleep calmly,

her face in his armpit. Frequently during those nights she said: "It's good for me to sleep under your wing." Well, let her sleep meantime. Poor thing, she had little time left to nestle against him.

In the mornings Grigory played with the children, then went wandering aimlessly through the village. In company he felt more cheerful. One day Prokhor proposed meeting at Nikita Melnikov's, to drink with the other young Cossacks who had been their regimental comrades. Grigory flatly refused. He knew from the villagers' conversation that they were discontented with the grain-requisitioning, and that there would inevitably be talk of this over the drinks. He did not wish to draw suspicion down on himself, and even when he chanced to meet acquaintances he avoided talking about politics. He had had enough of politics, they had done him enough harm already.

His caution was all the more justified because the grain-requisitioning was yielding poor results, and in consequence three old men were arrested as hostages and sent under escort to Vyeshenskaya.

The following day, close to the co-operative shop, Grigory saw the former artilleryman Zakhar Kramskov, who had recently returned from the Red Army. He was thoroughly drunk and reeled as he walked; but as he came up to Grigory he buttoned up all the buttons of his dirty jacket and said hoarsely: "I wish you health, Grigory Panteleyevich."

"Same to you!" Grigory shook the stocky and well-knit artilleryman's hefty fist.

"Do you recognize me?"

"Why, of course."

"Do you remember how last year our battery saved you close to Bokovskaya? Without us your cavalry would have had a bad time. The Reds we bowled over that day, by hell! I was sighting for number one gun then." Zakhar thumped his fist hollowly against his broad chest.

Grigory looked furtively around—some Cossacks standing a little way off were listening to their conversation. The corners of Grigory's lips quivered, and he revealed his white, sturdy teeth in an angry snarl.

"You're drunk!" he said in an undertone, through his clenched teeth. "Go and sleep it off, and don't talk so much!"

"No, I'm not drunk," the fuddled artilleryman shouted. "Or maybe I'm drunk with misery! I've come home, but it's not life you live here, it's just bloody hell! The Cossacks don't live any more, and there aren't any Cossacks! Half a ton of grain they've requisitioned from me alone, and what do you call that? Did they sow it, that they have the right to take it away? Do they know what makes the grain grow?"

He stared with senseless, bloodshot eyes and suddenly swaying, pawed Grigory, breathing heavy vodka fumes into his face.

"Why are you wearing trousers without stripes? Have you signed up as a peasant? We won't let you! My dear old Grigory Panteleyevich, we've got to fight it out again! We'll say, as we did last year: 'Down with the commune, but hurrah for the Soviet regime!'"

Grigory roughly pushed him away and muttered: "Go home, you drunken swine! Do you know what you're saying?"

Kramskov thrust out one hand, spreading his tobacco-stained fingers and mumbled: "I'm sorry if I said something wrong. Excuse me, but I'm speaking sincerely to you, as to my commander. . . . As to my own commander: we've got to fight it out again!"

Grigory silently turned away and walked home across the square. The impression of this untimely meeting remained with him until evening; he recalled Kramskov's drunken shouts, the Cossacks' sympathetic silence and smiles, and thought: "I must clear out quickly. No good will come of this. . . ."

He was due to go to Vyeshenskaya on Saturday. Within three days he would have to leave his native village. But that was not to be: on Thursday night—he was already getting ready for sleep—someone knocked violently at the door. Aksinya went out into the porch. He heard her ask: "Who's there?" He did not catch the answer, but, moved by a vague feeling of anxiety, he rose from the bed and went to the window. The latch rattled in the passage. The first to enter was Dunya. Grigory caught sight of her pale face and, even before he asked any questions, picked up his cap and greatcoat from the bench.

"Brother—"

"What is it?" he quietly asked as he thrust his arms into his greatcoat sleeves.

Dunya hurriedly panted: "Brother, clear out at once! Four horsemen have come from Vyeshenskaya. They're sitting in the best room. . . . They talked in whispers, but I heard. I stood close to the door and heard everything. I heard Mikhail say you must be ar-

rested. . . . He's telling them all about you. . . . Clear out!"

Grigory strode swiftly across to her, put his arms around her, and kissed her strongly on the cheek.

"Thank you, Sister. Now go back or they'll notice you've come out. Good-bye!" He turned to Aksinya: "Bread! Quick! No, not a whole loaf, only a hunk."

So his brief life of peace was at an end. . . . He acted as though in a battle, hurriedly yet confidently; he went into the best room, cautiously kissed the sleeping children, then took Aksinya into his arms.

"Good-bye! I'll let you have news of myself soon. Prokhor will tell you. Look after the children. Fasten the door. If they knock, say I've gone to Vyeshenskaya. Well, good-bye, and don't grieve, Aksinya!" As he kissed her he felt the warm, salty moisture of tears on his lips.

He had no time to comfort her and to listen to her helpless, broken words. He gently parted the arms embracing him, strode into the passage, listened, then threw the outside door wide open. The cold wind blowing up from the Don lashed in his face. For a second he closed his eyes, to get accustomed to the darkness.

Aksinya heard the snow scrunching under Grigory's feet. And every step drove a sharp pain into her heart. Then the sound of footsteps died away and the wattle fence creaked. Everything grew quite still; only the wind howled in the forest beyond the Don.

She tried to catch some sound through the roar of the wind, but she heard nothing. She suddenly felt cold. She went into the kitchen and put out the lamp.

X

Late in the autumn of 1920, when, owing to the poor results achieved by the grain-requisitioning policy, the Soviet Government found it necessary to organize grain-collection detachments, unrest broke out among the Cossack population of the Don. Small armed bands sprang into existence in the upper Don districts of Shumilinskaya, Kazanskaya, Migulinskaya, Meshkovskaya, Vyeshenskaya, Yelanskaya, and elsewhere. These bands were the response of the richer section of the Cossackry to the organization of grain-collection detachments and to the Soviet Government's increasingly strict measures to carry out the grain-requisitioning policy.

The majority of the bands, which consisted of anything from five to twenty men, were formed from local Cossacks who were former active White Guards. They included men who during the years 1918 and 1919 had served in punitive detachments, non-commissioned officers and junior officers of the former Don Army who had evaded the Soviet September mobilization, insurgents who had distinguished themselves by military exploits and the execution of Red Army prisoners during the previous year's rising in the upper Don area—in short, men who in no circumstances could settle down under the Soviet regime.

The bands fell upon the requisitioning detachments in the villages, turned back villagers' wagons carrying grain to the collection-points, and killed Communists and non-Party Cossacks devoted to the Soviet regime.

The task of exterminating these bands was entrusted

ed to a garrison battalion for the Upper Don Region, stationed at Vyeshenskaya and at the village of Bazki. But all the attempts to destroy the bands scattered over the extensive Don territory proved unsuccessful, primarily because the local population were sympathetic to the rebels, supplied them with food, informed them of the movements of the Red Army forces, and also concealed them from pursuit. But in addition the battalion commander Kaparin, a Socialist-Revolutionary and former staff captain in the tsarist army, was by no means anxious to see the elimination of the counter-revolutionary forces in this area and did all he could to hinder operations against them. Only occasionally, when driven into action by the chairman of the Regional Party Committee, did he make brief expeditions with his troops, quickly returning to Vyeshenskaya on the pretext that he must not disperse his forces or take imprudent risks, leaving Vyeshenskaya and its regional organizations and warehouses without adequate defence. The battalion, which numbered some four hundred bayonets and fourteen machine-guns, performed garrison duties; the men guarded prisoners, brought water, chopped down trees in the forest, and also, as part of their compulsory labour duty, collected gall nuts from oak-trees for the manufacture of ink. The battalion successfully supplied wood and ink to all the numerous regional organizations and offices, but meanwhile the number of small insurgent bands in the area was growing alarmingly. And not until December, when a considerable rising broke out in the Boguchar District of the Voronezh Province bordering on the Upper Don Region, was

the timber-cutting and gall-nut collecting perforce brought to an end. By order of the army commander of the Don Province the battalion, consisting of three companies and a machine-gun section, was sent, with the garrison cavalry squadron, the First Battalion of the 12th Grain-Requisitioning Regiment, and two small local defence detachments, to crush the rising.

In an engagement near the village of Sukhoi Donets the Vyeshenskaya squadron, commanded by Yakov Fomin, attacked the lines of insurgents on the flank, swept them away, put them to flight and sabred some hundred and seventy men in the pursuit, while losing only three men. With few exceptions every man in the squadron was a Cossack, a native of the upper Don area. In this fight they were once more faithful to the age-old Cossack traditions. Despite the protests of the two Communists in the squadron, after the battle almost half the men exchanged their old great-coats and padded jackets for good sheepskins taken from the dead insurgents.

A few days after the rising had been suppressed the squadron was recalled to Kazanskaya. Here Fomin rested from the burdens of military life, amusing himself to the best of his ability. An incorrigible woman-chaser, a merry and sociable Cossack, he disappeared night after night, returning to his quarters only at dawn. When his men, with whom their commander was on familiar terms, saw Fomin in the street of an evening with his boots brilliantly polished, they exchanged knowing winks and remarked:

"Well, so our stallion is off to the mares again! Now he won't come out till dawn!"

Unknown to the squadron commissar and political instructor, Fomin was in the habit of visiting the quarters of certain Cossacks of his squadron with whom he was on good terms whenever they passed him the word that vodka was plentiful and a carousal was on the way. These visits occurred quite frequently. But soon the dashing commander grew bored and moody and almost entirely forgot his recent ways of finding amusement. He no longer cleaned his elegant top-boots so diligently of an evening and did not bother to shave every day. He still occasionally dropped in for a drink at the quarters of fellow-villagers in the squadron, but he did not take any great part in the conversation.

The change in Fomin's behaviour coincided with a report he had received from Vyeshenskaya. The political department of the Don Cheka briefly informed him that at Mikhailovka, in the neighbouring Ust-Medveditskaya area, a garrison battalion with its commander Vakulin had revolted.

Vakulin happened to be a regimental comrade and friend of Fomin's. At one time they had served together in the insurgent Mironov corps, and together they had piled their arms when that force was surrounded by the Budyonny cavalry. The friendly relations between Fomin and Vakulin had never been broken off, and only a little time before, at the beginning of September, Vakulin had visited Vyeshenskaya. Even then he had ground his teeth and complained to his old friend about the "domination of the commissars, ruining the farmers with their grain-requisitioning and leading the country to disaster." In his heart Fomin agreed with Vakulin's views, but he conducted himself dis-

creetly, with a cunning which frequently served him in place of mother wit. Fomin was naturally cautious, never in a hurry, and never committing himself immediately one way or another. But soon after he had learned of the revolt of Vakulin's battalion his habitual caution forsook him. One evening, just before the squadron's departure for Vyeshenskaya, a number of the Cossacks gathered in the quarters of the troop commander Alferov. A great horse-bucket stood filled with vodka. An excited conversation was going on around the table. Fomin, who was present at this drinking-bout, listened in silence to the talk and as silently bailed out vodka from the bucket. But when one of the Cossacks began to recall how they had gone into the attack close to Sukhoi Donets, Fomin, thoughtfully twisting his moustache, interrupted him: "We cut down the Ukrainians pretty well, boys, but let's hope we ourselves shan't be grieving before long. Supposing when we get back to Vyeshenskaya we find the grain-collection detachments have pumped all the grain out of our homes? The Kazanskaya people are mighty sore with these grain detachments. They've been sweeping the corn-bins out with brooms. . . ."

A hush fell over the room. Fomin looked at his men and said with a forced smile: "I was only joking. . . . Watch out, and don't let your tongues wag, for the devil knows what a joke can sound like to others."

On his return to Vyeshenskaya, Fomin, accompanied by half a troop of his cavalry, rode home to Rubezhny village. He dismounted at the gate, flung the rein to one of his men, and strode into the house.

He nodded coldly to his wife, made a low bow to his mother and respectfully shook her hand, then embraced his children.

"But where's Father?" he asked, as he sat down on a stool and placed his sabre between his knees.

"Gone to the mill," his mother answered. Glancing at her son, she sternly ordered him: "Take off your cap, you heathen! Who ever sits under the icon with his cap on? Ah, Yakov, you'll lose your head one of these days!"

Fomin smiled forcedly and removed his cap, but made no attempt to take off his outdoor clothes.

"Why don't you take off your coat?" his mother demanded.

"I've only dropped in for a minute or two to see you. I never get time on service. . . ."

"We know your service!" the old woman said harshly, hinting at her son's dissolute behaviour and his associations with women at Vyeshenskaya. The rumours of his conduct had long been going the rounds of Rubezhny.

Fomin's wife, a prematurely aged, pale-faced, and downtrodden woman, glanced in alarm at her mother-in-law and went off to the stove. To do something to please her husband, to ingratiate herself with him, and to win at least one gracious look, she took a rag from under the stove, went down on her knees, and, bent double, set to work to clean off the thick mud clinging to his boots.

"What fine boots you've got, Yakov! But they're very muddy. I'll get them clean for you, I'll clean

them till they shine," she whispered almost inaudibly, not raising her head, crawling on her knees round her husband's feet.

He had not lived with her for years, and for years he had not had any feeling except a faint, contemptuous pity for this woman whom in his youth he had loved. But she had gone on loving him and forgave him everything, secretly hoping that he would come back to her sooner or later. For many long years she had carried on the farm, brought up the children, and done all she could to please her capricious mother-in-law. All the burden of the field labour fell on her frail shoulders. Excessive labour and an ailment which had afflicted her after the birth of their second child had sapped her strength more and more as the years passed. She had grown very thin. Her face had lost its bloom. Premature old age had thrown a spider's web of furrows over her cheeks. The expression of terrified humility which is found in the eyes of intelligent sick animals appeared in her eyes. She herself did not realize how swiftly she was ageing, how her health was declining with every day, and she still clung to hope, and on the rare occasions when they met she gazed at her handsome husband with a timid love and admiration.

Fomin stared down at his wife's miserably bowed back and the gaunt, sharply outlined shoulder-blades under her blouse, at her big, trembling hands diligently cleaning the mud from his boots, and thought: "She's a beauty, and no mistake! And that's what I slept with at one time! But she's aged terribly. How she has aged!"

"That's enough! I'll only get them muddy again," he said in a tone of annoyance, freeing his foot from his wife's hands.

She painfully straightened her back and rose from her feet. A faint flush appeared on her yellow cheeks. There was such an expression of love and dog-like devotion in her tearful eyes as she looked at Fomin that he turned away and asked his mother: "Well, and how are you all getting on?"

"The same as usual," the old woman replied morosely.

"Has a grain-collecting detachment been in the village?"

"It rode off to Nizhne-Krivskaya only yesterday."

"Did they take any grain from us?"

"Yes. How much did they take, Davydka?"

"Grandad saw them, he knows. I think it was ten sacks," the boy answered. He was fourteen, with wide-set blue eyes like his father's.

"A-h!" Fomin rose, glanced sharply at his son, and adjusted his sword-belt. His face paled slightly as he asked: "Did you tell them whose grain they were taking?"

The old woman waved her hand and smiled, not without a hint of malevolence.

"They don't take much note of you! Their commander said: 'Everybody without distinction has got to hand over their surplus grain. Even if he is Fomin, even if he's the regional chairman himself, we're still going to take the surplus grain.' And with that they began to rummage in the corn-bins."

"I'll get even with them, Mother! I'll get even with

"n!" Fomin said thickly, and took a hurried leave of the family.

After this visit to his home he began discreetly to ascertain the feelings of the men in his squadron and was easily enough convinced that the majority of them were dissatisfied with the grain-requisitioning policy. Their wives and near and distant relations from the various villages and districts came on visits to them and told of how the grain-collecting detachments were carrying out searches and were collecting all the grain, leaving only enough for seed and food. As a result, at a garrison meeting held in Bazki at the end of January, men of the squadron openly interrupted a speech by the regional military commissar Shakhayev. Shouts came from their ranks:

"Call off the requisitioning detachments!"

"It's time to finish taking our grain!"

"Down with the requisitioning commissars!"

In reply the Red Army men of the garrison company shouted:

"Counter-revolutionaries!"

"Break up those swine and send them to different regiments!"

The meeting was long and stormy. One of the few Communists in the garrison said anxiously to Fomin: "You must say something, Comrade Fomin! Look at the game your squadron men are playing!"

Fomin smiled under his moustache: "But I'm a non-Party man. Do you think they'll pay any attention to me?"

He did not break his silence and left the meeting long before it ended. He went out together with the

battalion commander Kaparin. On the way to Vyeshenskaya they fell to talking about the situation which had arisen, and very quickly found a common language. A week later, during a talk in Fomin's quarters, Kaparin told him frankly:

"Either we act now, or we shall never act, get that clear, Yakov Yefimovich! We must take advantage of the opportunity. It's a very suitable moment. The Cossacks will support us. You have great authority throughout the region. The people will never be in a more favourable mood. Why are you silent? Make up your mind."

"What have I got to make up my mind about?" Fomin drawled, looking at Kaparin from under his brows. "The question's already decided. Only we must work out a plan, to be sure everything goes smoothly, so that there won't be any mess-up. Let's talk about that."

The suspicious friendship between Fomin and Kaparin did not go unnoticed. Several Communists in the battalion organized a watch over them and communicated their suspicions to Artemyev, the head of the political department, and to Shakhayev, the military commissar.

"Once frightened twice shy!" Artemyev said with a laugh. "Kaparin's a coward; do you think he's likely to do anything decisive? We'll watch Fomin, we've had our eye on him for a long time now, only it's doubtful whether Fomin himself will dare do anything. It's all your imagination," he concluded decisively.

But it was now rather late to watch Fomin, for the conspirators had already come to an understanding.

The rising was fixed to begin on March 12 at eight in the morning. It was agreed that on that day Fomin was to lead the squadron out for morning exercises, in full fighting array. Then they would make a sudden attack on the machine-gun section stationed on the outskirts of Vyeshenskaya, capture the guns, and afterwards assist the garrison company to carry out a "purge" of the regional organizations.

Kaparin was uncertain whether all the battalion would support him and mentioned his doubts to Fomin. Fomin listened carefully and said: "So long as we grab the machine-guns we'll have your battalion quiet in two seconds."

The close watch kept on Fomin and Kaparin yielded no results. They met very rarely, and then only in connection with service matters, and not till the end of February did a patrol see them together in the street one night. Fomin was leading his saddled horse by the rein, Kaparin was walking beside him. When challenged, Kaparin answered: "Friend!" They turned into Kaparin's quarters. Fomin tied his horse to the balustrade of the porch. They did not light a lamp in Kaparin's room. Fomin left at four in the morning, mounted his horse, and rode to his quarters. That was all the patrol was able to establish.

The regional military commander, Shakhayev, reported his suspicions of Fomin and Kaparin in a code telegram to the army commander of the Don Province. A few days later he received an answer from the commander, sanctioning the removal of Fomin and Kaparin from their posts, and their arrest.

At a conference of the bureau of the Regional Party

Committee it was decided to inform Fomin that by an order of the regional military commissariat he had been recalled to Novocherkassk and placed at the disposition of the army commander, and that he was to hand over command of the squadron to his assistant, Ovchinnikov. The squadron was to be sent the same day to Kazanskaya, on the pretext that an armed band had arrived there, while the conspirators were to be arrested the next night. The decision to shift the squadron from Vyeshenskaya was reached out of fear that it might revolt when it learned of Fomin's arrest. The commander of the Second Company of the garrison battalion, a Communist named Tkachenko, was instructed to warn the Communist members of the battalion and the platoon commanders of the possibility of a rising and to hold the company and the machine-gun section in fighting order.

Fomin was informed of the order for his recall next morning.

"All right, you take over the squadron, Ovchinnikov. I'm going to Novocherkassk," he said calmly. "Do you want to go through the accounts?"

Ovchinnikov, a non-Party troop commander, who had received no warning and had no suspicions, buried himself in the squadron papers.

Fomin took the opportunity to write a note to Kaparin: "We act today. I've been recalled. Get ready!" In the porch he handed the note to his orderly, and whispered:

"Put it in your cheek. Ride at a walking pace. Understand? Ride to Kaparin at a walking pace. Hand

the note to him and return here at once. If anyone stops you on the road, swallow it."

On receiving the order to lead the squadron to Kazanskaya district centre Ovchinnikov paraded the Cossacks in the church square in readiness for the march. Fomin rode up to him.

"May I say good-bye to the squadron?"

"By all means! Only get it over quickly, don't hold us up."

Reining in his prancing horse in front of the squadron, Fomin shouted to the men: "You all know me, Comrades. You know what I've always fought for. I've always been with you. But today I can't accept a state of things when the Cossacks are being robbed, when the men who grow the grain are being pillaged. And that is why I have been released from my command. And I know well enough what they mean to do to me. That is why I want to say good-bye to you. . . ."

For a second Fomin's speech was interrupted by cries and uproar among the squadron. He stood in his stirrups and sharply raised his voice.

"If you want to free yourselves of this robbery, turn out the requisitioning detachments, kill the commissars like Shakhayev. They've come to the Don. . . ."

His last words were drowned in the tumult. Waiting a moment, he sonorously gave the order:

"By the right in threes—right wheel—quick march!"

The squadron obediently carried out the command. Dumbfounded at what had happened, Ovchinnikov rode up to Fomin and demanded: "Where are you going, Comrade Fomin?"

Without turning his head, Fomin retorted: "Just for a ride round the church."

Only then did Ovchinnikov grasp the significance of all that had been occurring during those last few minutes. He rode his horse out of the file, followed by the political instructor, the vice-commissar, and one man. Fomin noticed that they were missing only when they had gone a couple of hundred paces. Turning his horse, he shouted.

"Ovchinnikov, halt!"

The four riders spurred their mounts out of their easy trot into a gallop. Clumps of half-melting snow went flying in all directions from the horses' hoofs. Fomin gave the command:

"To arms! Capture Ovchinnikov! First Troop, after them!"

A ragged volley of shots rang out. The sixteen men of the First Troop dashed off in pursuit. Meanwhile Fomin split the rest of the squadron into two groups; he sent one group, under Chumakov, the commander of the Third Troop, to disarm the machine-gun section, and himself led the rest towards the spot where the garrison company was stationed on the northern outskirts of the village, in large stables.

Firing in the air and waving their sabres, the first insurgent group galloped along the main street. They sabred four Communists as they went, hurriedly formed up on the outskirts, and, silently, without a cheer, charged into the attack against the Red Army men of the machine-gun section as they came running out of their quarters.

The house in which the machine-gun section was quartered stood a little apart from the rest of the village. But only some two hundred paces separated it from the last houses. The Cossacks were met by machine-gun fire at point-blank range and at once turned back. Three of them were hit and bowled out of their saddles before they could reach the nearest lane.

The attempt to take the machine-gunners by surprise had failed. The insurgents did not try again. The commander of the group led his men under cover; without dismounting he peered warily round the corner of a stone-built shed and said: "They've rolled out a couple more Maxims." He wiped his sweaty brow with his fur cap and turned to the others:

"We'll ride back, boys. Let Fomin capture the machine-gunners himself. How many have we left lying on the snow—three? Well, let him try his hand himself."

As soon as firing broke out on the eastern outskirts of the village the company commander Tkachenko dashed out of his quarters, dressing as he went, and ran to the barracks. Some thirty Red Army men were already drawn up in rank outside. They greeted him with a rain of questions:

"Who's shooting?"

"What's up?"

Without answering, he ordered the Red Army men who came pouring out of the barracks to fall in also. Several Communists, workers in the regional administration, who had run to the barracks also joined the ranks. Scattered rifle-shots sounded in the village. Somewhere on the western outskirts there was the dull

thud of a hand-grenade. Seeing some fifty horsemen galloping with bared sabres towards the barracks, Tkachenko unhurriedly drew his pistol out of its holster. All talk died away in the ranks and the men brought their rifles to the ready before he had time to give the order.

"But they're our men coming! Look, there's our battalion commander, Comrade Kaparin!" one Red Army man shouted.

Tearing along the street, the horsemen suddenly, as though by command, bent over the necks of their horses and galloped furiously towards the barracks.

"Don't let them come near!" Tkachenko shouted sharply.

The volley which rang out drowned his voice. When the riders were still a hundred paces away from the serried ranks of the Red Army men, four flew out of their saddles, and the others scattered in disorder and turned back. Shots crackled after them. One of the riders, evidently lightly wounded, fell from his saddle, but held on to the rein. For twenty yards or so he was dragged by his galloping horse; then he regained his feet, clutched at a stirrup and the rear pommel of the saddle, and the next moment he was back in his seat. Pulling furiously on the reins, he turned his horse sharply as it galloped and vanished down the nearest lane.

The men of the First Troop vainly pursued Ovchinnikov and returned to the village. A search for the commissar Shakhayev was also fruitless. He was neither in the deserted military commissariat nor in his quarters. The moment he heard the sound of firing he

rushed down to the Don, crossed over on the ice into the forest, thence to the village of Bazki, and the next day he was in the Ust-Khoperskaya District, a good fifty versts from Vyeshenskaya.

The majority of the leading regional officials managed to get away in time. Nor was it safe to search for them, as the Red Army men of the machine-gun section had advanced with light machine-guns to the centre of Vyeshenskaya and had covered all the streets leading to the main square.

The men of the squadron abandoned the search, dropped down to the Don, and rode to the church square, where they had begun their pursuit of Ovchinnikov. Soon all the men were assembled. They again fell in. Fomin gave orders for guards to be set and for the others to go to their quarters, but to keep their horses saddled.

Fomin, Kaparin, and the troop commanders took counsel together in one of the houses on the outskirts.

"Everything's lost!" Kaparin exclaimed in despair, collapsing helplessly on a bench.

"Yes. We haven't captured the district centre, so we shan't be able to hold out here," Fomin said quietly.

"Let's have a ride round the region, Yakov Yefimovich. It's no good getting scared now! In any case we shan't die before we're dead. We'll raise the Cossacks, and then the district centre will be ours," Chumakov proposed.

Fomin stared at him without speaking and turned to Kaparin.

"Feeling down in the mouth, Your Excellency? Stop snivelling! You may as well be hanged for a sheep

as a lamb! We've begun together, now let's carry on together. What do you think? Should we withdraw from Vyeshenskaya or try again?"

Chumakov said sharply: "Let others try! I'm not going to face a machine-gun. That's a hopeless game."

"I'm not asking you! You shut up!" Fomin glanced at Chumakov, who turned his eyes away.

After a moment Kaparin said: "Yes, of course, its senseless to try a second time now. They've got the superiority in weapons. They've got fourteen machine-guns, and we haven't one. And they've got more men. . . . We must retreat and organize the Cossacks in a rising. While the Reds are being sent reinforcements the whole region will be in the grip of the revolt. That's our only hope. There's no other."

After a long silence Fomin said: "Well, we'll have to decide on that. Troop commanders, get busy and check up on the equipment, find out how many cartridges each man has. Give strict orders that not a single cartridge is to be wasted. The first man who disobeys I'll sabre myself. Tell the men that." He was silent for a moment, then angrily banged his enormous fist down on the table. "Ah, those damned machine-guns! And it's all your fault, Chumakov! If we'd managed to capture even four of them. . . . Now, of course, they'll drive us out of the place. Well, dismiss! We'll spend the night in Vyeshenskaya, if we're not driven out, and at dawn we'll advance into the region. . . ."

The night passed quietly. At one end of Vyeshenskaya were the men of the insurgent squadron, at the other the garrison battalion, with the Communists and Young Communists who had joined it. Only two blocks

of houses separated the enemies, but neither side dared to make a night attack.

Next morning the squadron abandoned the village without a fight and made off in a south-easterly direction.

XI

For three weeks after Grigory had left home he lived in the village of Verkhne-Krivskoi in Yelanskaya District, staying with a Cossack acquaintance who had been his regimental comrade. Then he moved on to the village of Gorbatovsky, where he lived for more than a month with a distant relative of Aksinya's.

For days on end he stayed indoors, going out into the yard only at night. But this life was as bad as being in prison. He was downcast, oppressed by his inactivity. He was almost irresistibly drawn homeward, to his children, to Aksinya. Frequently during his sleepless nights he put on his greatcoat, firmly resolved to go back to Tatarsky. But each time he changed his mind and took off his coat again, throwing himself with a groan face downward on the bed. This existence was trying him beyond endurance. The master, his host, who was a cousin of Aksinya's parents, sympathized with him, but he could not keep such a lodger for ever. One evening after supper Grigory, who had gone to his room, overheard the mistress asking in a voice thin with hatred: "And when is all this to end?"

"All what? What are you talking about?" the master answered in his deep voice.

"When are we going to get rid of this idle guzzler?"

"Hold your tongue!"

"I won't! We've got so little grain left that it would make a cat weep, and yet you're keeping and feeding this hunchbacked devil day after day. How long is this going on, I ask you? And supposing the Soviet finds out? They'll take off our heads, and our children will be left orphans."

"Hold your tongue, Avdotya!"

"I won't! We've got children to think of. We haven't got more than about seven hundredweight of grain left, and you've been feeding this drone! What is he to you? Your own brother? Your son-in-law's father? A cousin? He's not any near relation to you. So far as you're concerned, he's first-cousin jelly to second-cousin water, and yet you're keeping him, giving him food and drink. Ah, you baldheaded devil! Hold your tongue, don't bark at me, or I'll go to the Soviet myself tomorrow and tell them the sort of flower you're tending in this house!"

Next day the master came into Grigory's room and said, staring down at the floor: "Grigory Panteleyevich, think what you like of me, but you can't stay here any longer. I respect you, and I knew your dead father and respected him. But it's difficult for me to go on keeping you eating our food. And besides, I'm afraid the authorities might find out about you. I have a family. I don't want to lose my head through you. Forgive me, for Christ's sake, but free us of yourself. . . ."

"Good!" Grigory said curtly. "Thank you for giving me food and shelter. Thank you for everything. I can

see for myself that I'm a burden to you, but where am I to go? All my paths are closed."

"You'll have to decide that yourself."

"All right! I'll leave today. Thank you for everything, Artamon Vasilyevich."

"There's nothing to thank me for."

"I shan't forget your kindness. Maybe I shall be able to do you a service some day."

Deeply moved, the master clapped Grigory on the back.

"Why talk about it? So far as I'm concerned, you could stay here for another couple of months. But the wife won't allow it, she carries on at me every day, damn her! I'm a Cossack and you're a Cossack, Grigory Panteleyevich! You and I are both against the Soviet regime, and I'll help you. You go today to the village of Yagodny; my son's father-in-law lives there, he'll take you in. Tell him Artamon says he's to take you in as if you were his own son, to feed you and keep you as long as he can. And he and I will settle accounts later. Only you leave us this very day! I mustn't keep you here any longer; the wife's getting me down, and besides, I'm afraid they may find out at the Soviet. You've had a good stay here, Grigory Panteleyevich, and we'll call it enough. I've got some regard for my own head."

Grigory left the house late that night. But he had not reached the windmill standing on the hill above the village when three horsemen seemed to spring out of the earth and stopped him.

"Halt, you son of a bitch! Who are you?"

Grigory's heart beat violently. Without saying a

word, he stopped. To run would have been madness. There was neither hole nor bush anywhere near the road, only bare, empty steppe. He could not have gone two yards.

"A Communist? Get back, damn you! Now, quick!"

Riding his horse at Grigory, a second man ordered him: "Hands up! Take them out of your pockets! Out with them or I'll slash your head off!"

Grigory silently took his hands out of his greatcoat pockets and, still not understanding what had happened and who these men were, he asked: "Where am I to go?"

"To the village. Turn back!"

A single horseman escorted him to the village: the two others left them at the pasturage and rode off to the high-road. Grigory walked along without speaking. When he came to the road he slowed his steps, and asked: "Listen! Who are you?"

"Get on, get on! No talking! Put your hands behind you, do you hear?"

Grigory silently obeyed. But a little later he asked again: "All the same, who are you?"

"Russian Orthodox!"

"I'm not an Old Believer myself!"

"Well, you can be glad you're not!"

"Where are you taking me to?"

"To the commander. Get on, get on, you reptile, or I'll—"

The man pricked Grigory with the point of his sabre. The keen, cold steel stung his bare neck just between his greatcoat collar and his fur cap, and for a moment a feeling of terror flared up like a spark within

him, to be followed by impotent anger. Turning up his collar, half swinging round to glance at his convoy, he said through his teeth:

"Don't play the fool, do you hear? Otherwise I may get that thing away from you...."

"Move on, you scum, and don't talk! I'll get you away! Hands behind you!"

Grigory went on for a few paces in silence, then said: "I'm quiet without your swearing at me. What a swine you are!"

"Don't look back!"

"I'm not looking back."

"Hold your tongue and move quicker."

"Perhaps you'd like me to run?" Grigory asked, brushing the clinging snow-flakes from his eye-lashes.

Without answering, the escort touched up his horse. The animal's chest, wet with sweat and the dampness of the night, jolted Grigory in the back; a hoof squelched into the thawing snow by his feet.

"Not so much of that!" Grigory shouted, pushing his hand against the animal's chest.

The escort raised his sword to the level of his head and said in a quiet tone: "You get on, you bitch's bastard, and no talking, or I shan't take you all the way! I'm rather quick at that sort of thing! Shut up, and not a word more!"

They went in silence as far as the village. By the first yard the escort reined in his horse and said:

"Go through that gate!"

Grigory passed through a gate which was standing wide open. In the heart of the yard he saw a spacious, iron-roofed house. Under the eaves of a shed horses

were snorting and champing noisily. Six or more armed men were hanging around the porch. The escort sheathed his sabre and said as he dismounted: "Go into the house, straight along the passage, and the first door on the left. Get on and no looking round! How many times have I got to tell you?"

Grigory slowly went up the steps of the porch. A man dressed in a long cavalry greatcoat and a Red Army cap was standing by the rail.

"Caught someone, then?" he asked.

"Yes," the familiar, hoarse voice of Grigory's convoy answered surlily. "Caught him close to the windmill."

"Who is he: the secretary of the Party group?"

"The devil knows! Some swine: but we'll soon find out who he is!"

"Either this is a White band, or the Vyeshenskaya Cheka men are trying to be clever and are pretending to be Whites. I'm caught, like any mug!" Grigory thought, deliberately hanging back in the porch, trying to collect his thoughts.

The first man he saw when he opened the door was Fomin. He was sitting at a table, surrounded by a number of men dressed in military uniforms, all of them strangers to Grigory. Greatcoats and sheepskins were flung in a disorderly heap on the bed, carbines were piled by the bench, and on the bench itself was a mixed array of sabres, cartridge pouches and saddlebags. The men, the greatcoats, the equipment all gave off the strong scent of horses' sweat.

Grigory removed his fur cap and uttered a quiet greeting.

"Melekhov! Well, in very truth the steppe is broad,

but the road is narrow. So fate has brought us together again! Where have you turned up from? Take your coat off, come in and sit down." Fomin rose from the table and went across to Grigory, holding out his hand. "What were you doing hanging around here?"

"I've come to the village on business."

"What business? It's rather a long way for you to come." Fomin stared at Grigory inquisitively. "Tell the truth! You were in hiding here, weren't you?"

"That's the whole truth," Grigory answered, smiling forcedly.

"But where did my lads get hold of you?"

"Outside the village."

"Where were you going?"

"I was following my nose."

Fomin again stared closely into Grigory's eyes and smiled.

"I can see you're thinking we've caught you to carry you off to Vyeshenskaya! No, brother, that's no road for us. Don't be afraid! We've finished serving the Soviet regime. We couldn't settle down to live with it."

"We've had a divorce," an elderly Cossack smoking by the stove said in a deep voice.

One of the men sitting at the table burst into a loud laugh.

"Haven't you heard anything about me?" Fomin asked Grigory.

"No."

"Well, sit down at the table and we'll talk. Cabbage soup and meat for our guest!"

Grigory did not believe a word Fomin had said. Pale and restrained, he took off his coat and sat down.

He wanted a smoke, but he remembered that he had not had any tobacco for the last two days.

"Have you got anything to smoke?" he asked Fomin.

Fomin obligingly held out his leather cigarette-case. It did not escape his notice that as Grigory took the cigarette his hands trembled, and Fomin smiled again in his curling, ruddy moustache.

"We've risen against the Soviet regime. We're for the people and against grain-requisitioning and the commissars. They've made fools of us for a long time, but now we'll make fools of them. Do you understand, Melekhov?"

Grigory said nothing. He smoked, taking hurried draws at his cigarette. His head began to swim, and a feeling of nausea rose in his throat. He had been living on poor food during the past month, and only now did he feel how weak he had grown. Putting out his cigarette, he greedily set to work on the food. Fomin briefly told him about the rising and the first days of their wanderings about the region, magniloquently calling these wanderings "raids". Grigory listened in silence and swallowed down bread and the greasy, badly cooked lamb stew almost without chewing.

"But you've got thin while you've been enjoying other people's hospitality!" Fomin said with a benevolent laugh.

Grigory hiccuped and grunted:

"I haven't been living with my mother-in-law!"

"I can see that. Eat up, stuff as much as you can into yourself. We're not niggardly hosts!"

"Thank you. Now I'd like a smoke." Grigory took the cigarette offered him, went to a pot standing on a

bench, and, taking the wooden mug, scooped up some water. It was icy cold and slightly salt to the taste. Fuddled by his heavy meal, he greedily drank two large mugfuls of water, then began to enjoy his cigarette.

"The Cossacks aren't making us too welcome!" Fomin continued his story, seating himself beside Grigory. "They were badly shaken up during the rising last year. . . . Still, we've got some volunteers. About forty men have joined us. But that isn't what we're after. What we're after is to raise the whole region, and for the neighbouring regions, the Khoper and Ust-Medveditsa, to help too. And then we'll have a heart-to-heart talk with the Soviet regime!"

A noisy conversation was going on at the table. While Grigory listened to Fomin, he furtively examined his companions. Not one familiar face! He still did not believe Fomin, and thought he was being cunning; and he discreetly held his peace. But he could not remain silent all the time.

"If you're serious in what you say, Comrade Fomin, what is it you want? To start a new war?" he asked, trying to resist the drowsiness which was overcoming him.

"I've already told you about that."

"You want to change the government?"

"Yes."

"And what sort do you want to put in its place?"

"Our own Cossack government."

"A government of atamans?"

"Well, we'll wait a bit before we talk about the atamans! The government the people choose is the one we'll set up. But that isn't an urgent question and

besides I don't go in for politics; my job is to destroy the commissars and Communists, and Kaparin, my chief of staff, will tell you all about the government. He's my brains where that question's concerned. He's a brainy man and educated." Fomin bent towards Grigory and whispered: "He's a former staff captain of the tsarist army! A clever fellow! He's asleep in the other room at the moment; he's not too well, probably through not being used to this sort of life. We've been making some long marches."

In the porch there was a sudden uproar, the stamping of feet, a groan, a quiet scuffling, and a muffled shout: "Give it to him!" The talk at the table immediately died away. Fomin looked expectantly at the door. It was flung open. A billowing white cloud of vapour poured into the room. Driven forward by a resounding blow on the back, a tall, bare-headed man in a quilted khaki jacket and grey felt boots took several rapid, stumbling paces and struck his shoulder hard against the ledge of the stove. From the porch came a cheerful shout before the door was slammed:

"Here's one more for you!"

Fomin rose and adjusted the belt around his tunic.

"Who are you?" he asked authoritatively.

Panting, the man in the quilted jacket passed his hand over his hair, tried to wriggle his shoulders, and frowned with pain. He had been struck on the spine with something heavy, probably a rifle-butt.

"Can't you speak? Have you lost your tongue? Who are you, I asked."

"A Red Army soldier."

"What unit?"

"The 12th Grain-Requisitioning Regiment."

"Aha, this is a find!" one of the men sitting at the table declared with a smile.

Fomin continued the examination.

"What were you doing here?"

"We were to defend . . . we were sent. . . ."

"Of course! How many of you were there in the village?"

"Fourteen."

"Where are the others?"

The Red Army man did not answer; he had difficulty in opening his lips. A bubbling noise came from his throat, a thin stream of blood flowed out of the left corner of his mouth and over his chin. He wiped his lips with his hands, looked at his palm, and wiped it on his trousers.

"That's your swine . . ." he said in a gurgling voice, swallowing his blood. "They've injured my lungs. . . ."

"Never you fear! We'll get you well!" a stocky Cossack said jestingly, rising from the table and winking at the others.

"Where are the rest of you?" Fomin asked again.

"Gone to Yelanskaya with the baggage train."

"And where are you from? What district were you born in?"

The man looked at Fomin with feverishly glittering blue eyes, spat out a clot of blood on to the floor, and answered in a clear, resonant bass:

"Pskov Province."

"Pskov, Moscow . . . we know your kind!" Fomin said with a sneer. "You've come a long way for other

people's grain, my lad! Well, no more talk! What are we to do with you, eh?"

"You must let me go."

"You're a simple sort, my lad! But maybe we will let him go. What do you say, boys?" Smiling into his moustache, Fomin turned to the men sitting at the table.

Grigory, who had been watching closely, saw quiet, understanding smiles on the brown, weather-beaten faces.

"He can serve with us for a couple of months, and then we'll let him go home to his wife," one of the men said.

"Maybe you'll serve with us?" Fomin asked, vainly trying to hide his smile. "We'll give you a horse and saddle, and instead of your felt boots you shall have new leg-boots with shaped calves. . . . Your commanders don't fit you out very well. Do you call that foot-wear? There's a thaw outside, and you're going about in felt boots! Will you join us?"

"He's a peasant; he's never ridden horseback in his life!" one of the Cossacks lisped in a falsetto voice, pretending to be a half-wit.

The Red Army man was silent. He leaned his back against the stove, looking about him with eyes that had grown clear and bright. From time to time he frowned with pain, gaping slightly when he found it difficult to get his breath.

"Will you join us, or what?" Fomin asked again.

"But who are you?"

"Who are we?" Fomin raised his eyebrows and stroked his whiskers with his palm. "We're fighters

for the toiling people. We're against the oppression by the commissars and Communists, that's who we are."

Then Grigory suddenly saw a smile on the man's face.

"So that's who you are.... I was wondering who you could be." The prisoner smiled, revealing teeth stained with blood, and he spoke as though he were pleasantly surprised by the news he had heard. But in his voice there was also a note which caused everybody in the room to prick up his ears. "So you call yourselves fighters for the people? M'yes! But in our language you're just bandits. And you want me to serve you? Well, you've got a fine sense of humour, I must say."

"You're a bit of a wag too, I can see that!" Fomin screwed up his eyes and snapped curtly: "Communist?"

"No, of course not. I'm non-Party."

"You don't sound like it."

"On my word I'm non-Party."

Fomin cleared his throat and turned to the table.

"Chumakov, put him out!"

"It's not worth while killing me. You've no reason to," the man said quietly.

The only answer was silence. Chumakov, a well-built, handsome Cossack in an English leather jerkin, unwillingly rose from the table, smoothing his already sleek auburn hair.

"I'm fed up with this job," he said boldly, taking his sabre from the heap flung down on the bench and trying the blade with his thumb.

"You haven't got to do it yourself. Tell the boys in the yard," Fomin counselled him.

Chumakov coldly ran his eyes over the prisoner from head to foot and said: "Go in front, my lad!"

The Red Army man staggered away from the stove, hunched his shoulders, and slowly went towards the door, leaving the damp traces of his wet felt boots on the floor.

"You might have wiped your boots when you came in! Coming in here, making the floor dirty . . . what a filthy beast you are, brother!" Chumakov said with feigned annoyance as he followed the prisoner.

"Tell them to take him into the lane or into the threshing-floor. Don't do it close to the house or the masters will complain!" Fomin shouted after him.

He went across to Grigory, sat down beside him, and asked: "We give them a short trial, don't we?"

"Yes," Grigory answered, avoiding his eyes.

Fomin sighed.

"It can't be helped. That's how it's got to be now." He was about to say something more, but there was a noisy tramping of feet in the passage, someone shouted, and a single shot cracked loudly.

"What the hell are they up to out there!" Fomin exclaimed in an angry tone.

One of the men sitting at the table jumped up and kicked the door open. "What's happening out there?" he shouted into the darkness.

Chumakov came in and reported briskly:

"He turned out to be quite smart, the devil! He jumped from the top step and ran. I had to waste

a cartridge on him. The boys outside are finishing him off...."

"Tell them to drag him out of the yard into the lane."

"I've told them already, Yakov Yefimovich."

The room was quiet for a moment. Then someone asked, stifling a yawn: "What's the weather like, Chumakov? Is it clearing up?"

"It's cloudy."

"If it rains it'll wash the last snow away."

"What do you want it to rain for?"

"I don't want it to. I'm not after squelching through mire."

Grigory went to the bed and picked up his cap.

"Where are you going?" Fomin asked.

"To get a breath of air."

He went out on the steps of the porch. The moon was shining dimly through clouds. The spacious yard, the roofs of the sheds, the bare tops of the poplars, the horses standing covered with horse-cloths at the hitching-posts, were all illumined with the ghostly, dove-blue light of midnight. Several paces from the porch lay the Red Army man, his head in a faintly gleaming puddle of thaw-water. Three Cossacks were bent over him, talking quietly as they did something to him.

"He's still breathing, by God!" one of them said in a vexed tone. "What did you hit him like that for, you clumsy devil? I told you to aim at his head. Ah, you swill!"

A gruff-voiced Cossack, the same man who had brought in Grigory, answered:

"He'll peg out! He'll give one belch and peg out! But lift his head up! I can't get this coat off anyhow. Lift him by the hair. That's right! And now hold him."

Grigory heard the splash of water. One of the men standing over the prisoner straightened up. The gruff-voiced Cossack, who was squatting down, grunted as he pulled the quilted jacket off the body. A moment or two later he said:

"I've got a light hand, and that's why he didn't snuff out at once. When I was at home if we happened to be slaughtering a hog—Hold him up, don't let him drop! Oh, damn it! As I was saying, I'd start to slaughter the hog, and I'd slash him right across the throat. I'd drive the knife right into his neck, and even then the damned animal would get up and walk about the yard. And he'd go on walking for quite a long time after! Streaming with blood he'd be, but he'd still go on living. So I must have a light hand. All right, drop him. . . . Is he still breathing? You don't say! Yet I nearly cut his neck in two!"

The third man spread out the Red Army man's jacket over his outstretched arm and said: "We've stained the left side with blood. . . . It's sticking to my hands! Pah, the filth!"

"It'll wear off. It isn't grease," the gruff-voiced man said, and squatted down again. "It'll wipe off, or wash off at any rate. It doesn't matter much."

"Now what are you going to do: thinking of taking his trousers off too?" the first Cossack asked discontentedly.

The gruff voice snapped back at him: "If you're in a hurry or want to go to the horses we'll manage here without you. We can't let good things go begging."

Grigory turned on his heel and went back into the house.

Fomin welcomed him with a swift, appraising glance and rose.

"Let's go into the other room and talk; there's too much of a row going on here," he proposed.

The large, warmly heated room stank of mice and hempseed. A rather small man in a khaki tunic was sleeping stretched out on the bed. His thin hair was dishevelled, and sprinkled with fluff and tiny feathers. He lay with his cheek pressed against a bare dirty pillow. The lamp hanging from the ceiling lit up his pale, long-unshaven face.

Fomin awakened him and said: "Get up, Kaparin! We've got a guest. This is Grigory Melekhov, a friend of ours, used to be a squadron commander."

Kaparin hung his legs over the edge of the bed, rubbed his face with his hands, and got up. He shook Grigory's hand, making a slight bow.

"Very pleased to meet you. I'm Staff Captain Kaparin."

Fomin affably pushed a chair across to Grigory and seated himself on a chest. He must have realized from Grigory's face that the murder of the prisoner had had a depressing effect on him, for he said: "You mustn't think we treat all our prisoners so rough. That fellow was a member of a grain-collecting detachment. And we're not going to let such men go,

or commissars either. . . . But we spare others. Yesterday we captured three militiamen. We took their horses, saddles, and equipment and set them free. What's the use of killing them?"

Grigory was silent. His hands resting on his knees, he was thinking his own thoughts, and he heard Fomin's voice as though in his sleep.

"... And so we're fighting like this for the time being," Fomin went on. "But we think we'll rouse the Cossacks all the same. Soviet power can't live. By all the signs there's war going on everywhere. Everywhere there are risings: in Siberia and in the Ukraine and even in Petrograd. The whole fleet has mutinied in that fortress—what's it called?"

"Kronstadt," Kaparin prompted him.

Grigory raised his head, looked at Fomin with vacant, apparently unseeing eyes, and shifted his gaze to Kaparin.

"Have a smoke," Fomin held out his cigarette-case. "Yes, Petrograd has been captured and they're getting near Moscow. It's the same tune everywhere. And there's no reason for us to be dozing! We'll rouse the Cossacks, sweep away the Soviet regime, and if the cadets give us any support, then we'll be doing fine. Let their educated men set up a government and we'll help them." He was silent for a moment, then asked: "What do you think, Melekhov? If the cadets drive hard from the Black Sea and we join up with them, they'll give us credit for the fact that we were the first to rise in the rear of the Reds, won't they? Kaparin says of course they will. For instance, surely they

won't hold it against me that I led the 28th Regiment away from the front in 1918 and served the Soviet Government for a couple of years?"

"So that's what you're aiming at! You're a fool, but a cunning one!" thought Grigory, involuntarily smiling. Fomin awaited his answer. It was evidently a problem that concerned him deeply.

Grigory said reluctantly: "That'll take a long time."

"Of course, of course," Fomin willingly agreed. "We shall see better later. But now we must act, we must smash the Communists in their rear. We won't let them have any peace anyhow! They think they can chase us by putting their infantry in wagons. Let them try. While cavalry is being sent to their aid we'll turn the whole region upside down."

Grigory again gazed down at his feet, thinking. Kaparin excused himself and lay down on the bed.

"I get very tired. We make such mad marches and get so little sleep," he said, smiling faintly.

"It's time we went to bed too." Fomin rose and dropped his heavy hand on Grigory's shoulder. "You were wise, Melekhov, to listen to my advice that day in Vyeshenskaya. If you hadn't hidden they'd have finished you off. You'd have been lying on the sand-hills outside Vyeshenskaya, with your finger-nails rotting. You can take that from me for a fact. Well, what have you decided? Speak up, and then let's get to bed."

"What am I to speak about?"

"Will you join us, or what? You can't spend all your life hiding in other people's houses."

Grigory had been expecting this question. Now he must make his choice: to go on wandering from village to village, living a hungry, homeless life, eating his heart out with longing until one of his hosts betrayed him to the authorities; or to go to the political department and submit; or to join Fomin. And he made his choice. For the first time that evening he looked straight into Fomin's face and said, twisting his lips into a smile: "I've got as much choice as the hero has in the fairy-tale: ride to the left and you'll lose your horse, ride to the right and you'll be killed. I've got three roads, and not one of them goes my way...."

"You make your choice without any fairy-tales. We'll tell the fairy-tales after."

"I've got nowhere to go to, so I've chosen already."

"Well?"

"I'll join your band."

Fomin knitted his brows discontentedly and bit his moustache.

"You drop that word! Why call it a band? That's what the Communists call us, but it's not for you to use the word. We're simply men who have revolted against the regime. Short and clear!"

His dissatisfaction was only momentary. He was obviously delighted with Grigory's decision and could not conceal the fact. Rubbing his hands, he said: "That's one more for our ranks! Do you hear, Staff Captain? We'll give you a troop, Melekhov, or if you don't want to command a troop you can be on the staff with Kaparin. I'll let you have my own horse. I've got a spare one."

XII

Towards dawn a light frost set in. The puddles were filmed with dove-blue ice. The snow turned rough and crunched harshly. The horses' hoofs left crumbling round imprints on the granular snowy pall, and where the previous day's thaw had eaten at the snow, the bare earth with the dead grass of last year nestling against it was only slightly marked by the hoofs and rang hollowly.

Fomin's band drew up in a column outside the village. Far off along the road the six horsemen of the advance reconnaissance patrol were occasionally to be seen.

"There's my army!" Fomin said with a smile, riding up to Grigory. "We could smash the devil himself with such lads!"

Grigory ran his eyes over the column and thought regretfully: "If you and your army had run up against my Budyonny squadron we'd have turned you into a heap of bones in half an hour!"

Fomin pointed with his whip and asked: "What do you think of them?"

"Not bad for killing prisoners and not bad for stripping the dead, but I don't know what they'd be like in a fight," Grigory answered dryly.

Turning in his saddle with his back to the wind, Fomin lit a cigarette and said:

"You'll get a chance of seeing them in a fight too. Most of my men are regular soldiers, they won't let you down."

Six two-horse wagons loaded with ammunition and supplies were placed in the middle of the column. Fomin galloped to the front and gave the order to advance. On the rise he rode up to Grigory again and said: "Well, how's my horse? To your liking?"

"He's a good horse."

They rode along for some time in silence, stirrup to stirrup, then Grigory asked: "Are you thinking of going through Tatarsky?"

"Wanting to see your people?"

"I'd like to visit them."

"We may. At the moment I'm thinking of making for the Chir, to shake up the Cossacks there a bit."

But the Cossacks were not very willing to be "shaken up." Grigory became convinced of that in his first few days with the band. When they occupied a village or district centre Fomin gave orders for a citizens' meeting to be held. Usually he himself did the speaking, but sometimes Kaparin took his place. They called upon the Cossacks to take up arms, talked of the "burdens" which had been laid on grain-growers by the Soviet regime, of the "utter ruin which will inevitably result if the Soviet Government isn't overthrown". Fomin spoke less grammatically and coherently than Kaparin but more expansively and in a language which the Cossacks understood. He usually ended his speech with set, memorized phrases: "From today on we free you from grain-requisitioning. Don't cart any more grain to the collection-points. It's time to stop feeding the Communist drones. They've grown fat on your

grain, but they're not going to live on other people any longer. You are free people. Arm yourselves and support our regime. Hurrah, Cossacks!"

The Cossacks stared down at the ground and remained morosely silent; but the women gave rein to their tongues. Sarcastic questions and shouts came from their massed ranks:

"Your regime sounds all right, but have you brought us any soap?"

"Where do you keep your government, in your saddle-bags?"

"But whose grain are you living on yourselves?"

"I suppose you'll be going from yard to yard to beg in a minute?"

"They've got swords! They'll start cutting off the chickens' heads without asking permission!"

"It's all very well telling us not to cart our grain. But you're here today and gone tomorrow. There'll be no finding you even with hounds, while we'll have to answer for it."

"We won't let you have our husbands. You do your own fighting!"

And much else did the women shout in their great obduracy, for during the years of war they had grown utterly disillusioned, were afraid of a new war, and clung to their husbands with the obstinacy of despair.

Fomin listened unconcernedly to their incoherent shouts. He knew their value. He waited until there was silence and turned to the Cossacks. And then they answered briefly and soberly: "Don't oppress us, Comrade Fomin; we've had enough of fighting."

"We've tried it, we rose in 1919."

"We haven't got anything to revolt with, and there's no sense in it. We haven't any need for it at the moment."

"It's time for sowing, not fighting."

One day someone shouted from the back of the crowd:

"You're talking sweetly enough now! But where were you in 1919, when we did rise? You've thought better of it rather late, Fomin!"

Grigory saw Fomin's face change, but he kept control of himself and made no answer.

During the first week Fomin generally listened quite calmly to the Cossacks' objections at the meetings and to their curt refusals to support his actions; even the women's shouts and curses did not upset his equanimity. "All right, we'll fix them!" he would say arrogantly, smiling in his moustache. But when he became convinced that the great mass of the Cossack population was not friendly towards him, he completely changed in his attitude to those who spoke at the meetings. And now he talked without dismounting from his horse and did not so much argue as threaten. But the result was the same: the Cossacks on whom he had counted for support listened to him in silence and as silently dispersed.

At one of the villages, after Fomin had spoken, a Cossack widow made a speech in answer. A huge woman, stout and big-boned, she spoke in an almost masculine voice and brandished her arms violently, like a man. Her broad, heavily pock-marked face was full of angry determination, her large, thick, pouting lips twisted continually in a contemptuous sneer.

Pointing her swollen red hand in the direction of Fomin, who was sitting stonily in his saddle, she seemed almost to spit out the stinging words:

"What are you causing trouble here for? Where do you want to drive our Cossacks to, into what hole? Hasn't this accursed war widowed enough of our women? Hasn't it orphaned enough of our children? Are you calling down new troubles on our heads? Look at this tsar-liberator that's turned up from the village of Rubezhny! You should put your own house in order and make an end to your own ruin, and then you could teach us how to live and what regime to accept. For in your own home your own wife can't get free of the collar, we know that very well! But you've fluffed up your moustache and are riding about on a horse, upsetting the people. Yet your own house would have fallen down long ago if the wind didn't hold it up. A fine teacher you are! What are you silent for, ginger knob? Is it lies I'm telling?"

A quiet laugh ran through the crowd. It rustled like a wind and died away. Fomin's left hand, lying on the saddle-bow, slowly fingered the reins; his face darkened with restrained anger. But he remained silent, trying to think of a dignified way out of his awkward position.

"And what is this government of yours, that you call on us to support it?" the widow continued energetically, now thoroughly worked up.

She put her arms akimbo and slowly made towards Fomin, swinging her broad haunches. The crowd opened a way for her, hiding their smiles and lowering

their laughing eyes. They cleared a ring as though for a dance, jostling one another.

"Your government won't last a moment after you've gone," the widow said in her low, deep voice. "It drags after you and never lives more than an hour in any one spot. 'Today on your horse, and tomorrow on your belly in the mud,' that's who you are, and your government's the same."

Fomin dug his heels into his horse's sides and rode the animal into the crowd. The people fell back in all directions. Only the widow was left in the middle of a great ring. She had seen many things in her time, and so she stared calmly at the snarling teeth of Fomin's horse, at Fomin's white, infuriated face.

Riding his horse at her, he raised his whip high above her head.

"Hold your tongue, you speckled vulture! What are you carrying on agitation here for?"

Held high by the rein, the horse's muzzle with its bared teeth hung right above the fearless woman's head. A pale-green clot of foam flew from the bit and fell on her black kerchief, and from it to her cheek. She swept it away with her hand and fell back a step.

"So you can speak, and we mustn't," she shouted, gazing at Fomin with dilated, furiously glittering eyes.

Fomin did not strike her. Shaking his whip, he roared:

"You Bolshevik scum! I'll thrash all the stupidity out of you! I'll have you tied up in your own skirt

and beaten with ram-rods. That'll bring you to your senses in less than no time!"

The widow fell back another couple of steps and, unexpectedly turning her back on Fomin, stooped to the ground and threw up the back edge of her skirt.

"Haven't you ever seen anything like that before, Anika the Warrior?" she shouted and, straightening up with amazing agility, she again turned to face Fomin. "Me? Whip me? You've got too much snot in your snout!"

Fomin spat furiously and drew on the reins, holding in his back-stepping horse.

"Shut your mouth, you foalless mare! You great chunk of meat!" he said in a loud voice, and wheeled his horse, vainly trying to look stern.

A murmur of laughter ran through the crowd. To save his commander's insulted honour, one of Fomin's men ran up to the widow, swinging the butt of his carbine. But a burly Cossack a couple of heads taller than he shielded the woman with his own broad shoulders and quietly but ominously said: "None of that!"

Three other villagers also came up swiftly and pushed the widow back. One of them, a youngster with bristling hair, whispered to the Fomin man: "Who are you aiming at, eh? It's easy enough to hit a woman! You go and show your pluck out in the fields, we can all be brave in the back yards!"

Fomin rode off at a walking pace to the fence, then stood in his stirrups.

"Cossacks, think it over well!" he cried, addressing the slowly dispersing crowd. "We're asking you nice enough now, but we'll be back in a week, and then we'll talk different!"

For some reason his mood had changed to one of merriment and, laughing, holding in his prancing horse, he shouted: "We're not cowards! You can't frighten us with women's—" (this was followed by several unprintable epithets). "We've seen them pock-marked, and with all sorts of other marks. We'll come back, and if none of you joins our detachment voluntarily, we'll enlist all the young Cossacks by force. Understand that! We haven't got time to cuddle you and gaze into your eyes!"

Laughter and animated conversation arose among the crowd, which had halted for a moment. Still smiling, Fomin gave the order:

"To horse!"

Purple with suppressed laughter, Grigory rode off to his troop.

Straggling along the miry road, the Fomin detachment rode over the top of the rise, and the inhospitable village dropped out of sight. But Grigory still smiled from time to time as he thought: "It's a good thing we Cossacks like our fun. Jokes come to stay with us more often than sorrow. By God, if life were all serious I'd have hanged myself long ago." His cheerful mood remained with him for a long time, and not until the next halt did he think anxiously and bitterly that they were not going to succeed in raising the Cossacks, and that all Fomin's schemes were doomed to inevitable disaster.

XIII

Spring came on. The sunlight now had more warmth to it. The snow melted on the southern slopes of the hills, and at noonday the earth, rusty with last year's grass, gave off a translucent lilac mist. In the warm patches, on the mounds, from under boulders half buried in the sandy soil sprouted the first brilliantly green, slender growths of honey-grass. The ploughed lands were bared. From the abandoned winter roads the rooks migrated to the threshing-floors, to the winter-corn fields flooded with thaw-water. In the ravines and dells the snow lay blue, soaked to the surface with moisture; from these spots a harsh cold still breathed. But in the gullies the spring brooklets, invisible to the eye, were already tinkling under the snow, and in the glades the branches of the poplars were beginning to display an almost imperceptible, tender vernal green.

The season of labour was approaching, and Fomin's band melted steadily as the days went by. After a halt for the night two or three men would be missing, and one morning almost half a troop vanished: eight men with their horses and equipment went off to Vyeshenskaya to surrender. It was time to plough and sow. The earth was calling, drawing the Cossacks to work, and convinced that the struggle was useless, many of Fomin's men secretly deserted from the band and rode off to their homes. There remained only the wild men who could not return in any case, men whose crimes against the Soviet Government were too great for them to hope for pardon.

By the first days of April, Fomin had not more than eighty-six sabres under his command. Grigory still remained with the band. He lacked the courage to go home. He was firmly convinced that Fomin's cause was lost, and that sooner or later the band would be broken up. He knew that at the first serious clash with any regular Red Army cavalry they would be smashed to the last man. Yet he remained under Fomin, secretly hoping to hang on somehow until the summer and then seize a couple of the best horses in the detachment, gallop at night to Tatarsky, and thence, with Aksinya, to the south. The Don steppe was broad, spacious; there were plenty of lonely tracks in it; in summer-time all the roads were open, and shelter could be found everywhere. He thought he would abandon the horses somewhere, make his way with Aksinya on foot to the Kuban, to the Caucasian foothills, far from their native parts, and live there through the troublous times. There was no other way out, it seemed to him.

On Kaparin's advice Fomin decided to cross to the left bank of the Don before the ice broke up. In the Khoper Region, where there were many forests, he hoped to be able to avoid pursuit if necessary.

The band crossed the Don above the village of Ribny. In places where the current ran swiftly, the ice had already been carried away. Under the bright April sun the water glittered as though covered with silvery scales; but where the winter track of trodden snow rose a couple of feet above the level of the ice, the Don still stood firm. They laid down wattles over the broken edge, led the horses across one by one,

fell in on the farther side, and, sending a reconnaissance patrol on ahead, moved in the direction of Yelanskaya District.

The following day Grigory chanced to see a fellow-villager from Tatarsky. The one-eyed old man was on his way to relatives at Gryaznovsky and ran into the band not far from the village. Grigory led the old man aside and asked: "Are my children alive and well, grandad?"

"God preserve them, Grigory Panteleyevich, they're alive and well."

"I've got a big thing to ask of you, grandad. Give them and my sister, Yevdokia Panteleyevna, a warm greeting from me, and a greeting to Prokhor Zykov, and say to Aksinya Astakhova that she is to expect me soon. Only don't tell anybody else you've seen me, will you?"

"I'll do it, lad; I'll do it. Never fear, I'll tell them all just as you ask."

"What news is there in the village?"

"Nothing at all; everything's as it was."

"Is Koshevoi still chairman?"

"Yes, he's the chairman."

"He isn't doing any harm to my family, is he?"

"I haven't heard anything about it, so he can't have touched them. And why should he? They're not to answer for you."

"What are people saying about me in the village?"

The old man blew his nose, spent a long time wiping his moustache and beard with his red neckerchief, then answered evasively: "The Lord knows.... They say all sorts of things, whatever comes into their heads."

Will you be making your peace with the Soviet Government soon?"

What could Grigory answer? Holding in his horse, which was straining to follow the detachment, he smiled and said: "I don't know, grandad. So far there's nothing I can say."

"How's that? We fought the Circassians, and we fought the Turks, but peace came of it. But you, you're all our own people, and yet you can't come to any agreement with one another.... It isn't well, Grigory Panteleyevich; on my word it isn't well! God the Almerciful, He sees all, He won't forgive you all this, you mark my words. I ask you, is it possible for Russians, true believers, to go on fighting like this among themselves, and with no end to it? You could have done a bit of fighting—but this is the fourth year you've been at one another's throats. As my old mind sees it, it's time to end it!"

Grigory said good-bye to the old man and galloped off to overtake his troop. The man stood leaning on his stick, rubbing his empty eye-socket with his sleeve. With his one youthfully keen eye he gazed after Grigory, admiring his fine bearing, and quietly whispered:

"He's a good Cossack! He's got bearing and everything else; and yet he's a wastrel. He's lost his road. By rights he ought to be fighting the Circassians, but look what he's thought of! Why by all the plagues should they care about the government? What are they thinking of, these young Cossacks? It's no good expecting anything from Grisha; all their tribe were always wastrels. His dead father, Pantelei, was twisted

of the same yarn, and I mind his grandfather Prokofy.... He was another crab apple, and not a man. But what other Cossacks are thinking ... God forgive me, I don't understand."

Now, when Fomin occupied a village, he no longer summoned a meeting of citizens. Experience had convinced him that propaganda methods were fruitless. He had enough to do to keep his own men, without trying to enrol new ones. He became morose and talked less, and soon began to find consolation in vodka. Whenever he happened to spend a night in a village, there were drinking-bouts. Following their ataman's example, his men drank also. Discipline was breaking down. Looting grew more frequent. The houses of the Soviet employees, who went into hiding whenever the band approached, were stripped of everything that could be carried on horseback. Many of the men had their saddle-bags crammed almost to bursting. One day Grigory noticed that a man in his troop was carrying a hand sewing-machine. He had hung the reins over his saddle-bow and was holding the machine under his left arm. Only by using his whip did Grigory succeed in forcing the Cossack to give up his prize. That evening Grigory had a sharp talk with Fomin. They were alone together in the room. His face puffy with drinking, Fomin sat at the table, while Grigory took great strides up and down the room.

"Sit down, don't go flickering about before my eyes," Fomin said angrily.

Paying no attention to his words, Grigory paced restlessly about the tiny room and said at last: "I've

had enough of this, Fomin! Put a stop to this looting and drinking."

"Did you have a bad dream last night?"

"More jokes. . . . The people are beginning to talk badly of us."

"You know as well as I do that I can't do anything with the boys," Fomin said reluctantly.

"But you're not trying to do anything with them!"

"Well, you're not my teacher. And the people aren't worth bothering about, anyway. We're suffering for them, the swine, but they—I'm going to look after myself, and that's enough."

"You're not even looking after yourself very well! You've never got any time to think because of your everlasting drinking. You haven't been sober for four days now, and everybody else is drinking too. They even drink on outpost duty, and at night into the bargain. What are you after? Do you want us to be caught in a village and massacred while we're drunk?"

"Do you think we shall avoid it?" Fomin sneered. "We've got to die some time. The pot got used to fetching water, but it was broken in the end. Do you know that?"

"Then let us ride to Vyeshenskaya tomorrow and put our hands up: 'Take us, we surrender!'"

"No, we'll go on enjoying life for a while. . . ."

Grigory halted opposite the table with his legs wide apart.

"If you don't bring order to the ranks and put an end to this looting and drinking, I'll clear out and take half the men with me," he said quietly.

"Try it!" Fomin menacingly answered.

"It won't need much trying!"

"You—you stop threatening me!" Fomin laid his hand on his holster.

"Don't paw your pistol, I can reach you quicker across the table!" Grigory said quickly, turning pale and half unsheathing his sabre.

Fomin laid his hands on the table and smiled. "What are you nagging at me for? My head's splitting already as it is, and then you come along with your idiotic talk! Put your sabre back in its scabbard. Can't I even joke with you, then? Aren't you strict! Just like a sixteen-year-old girl. . . ."

"I've told you what I want, so get it into your head and keep it there! Not all of us are of the same mind as you."

"I know that."

"Know it and remember it! You're to give orders tomorrow that the packs are to be emptied! We've got a cavalry force and not a pack-horse train. Drum that into them! And they call themselves fighters for the people! They've loaded themselves down with looted goods and go trading in the villages just like the pedlars used to do! It makes me sick with shame! What the devil did I join up with you for?" Pale with anger and indignation, Grigory spat and turned away to the window.

Fomin burst into a laugh and said: "We haven't once been hard pressed by cavalry yet. When a well-fed wolf is hunted by horsemen it belches up all it has eaten as it runs. And my rogues would get rid of everything if we were hunted in earnest. All right, Melekhov, don't get worked up, I'll see to it. It's

like this: I'd got a little down in the mouth and loosened the reins a bit. But I'll pull them up! We can't split up the detachment, we must drink our cup of sorrow together."

They were unable to finish the conversation: the mistress entered the room with a smoking dish of cabbage soup, and then Chumakov and a crowd of Cossacks poured in.

But the talk had its effect. Next morning Fomin gave the order for all packs to be emptied, and himself saw that it was carried out. During the examination of the packs one of the most inveterate looters tried to resist and would not part with his booty, and Fomin shot him where he stood in the ranks.

"Get rid of this carcass!" he said calmly, thrusting the body away with his boot. Looking around the men, he raised his voice. "We've had enough of this looting, you sons of bitches! That's not what I raised you against the Soviet regime for. You can strip a dead enemy of everything, even his dirty pants, if you've got the stomach for it. But you're not to touch their families. We're not fighting the women. And anyone who tries it on me will get the same treatment as this scum!"

A quiet murmur rose and died away in the ranks.

Order seemed to have been restored. For two or three days the band roamed along the left bank of the Don, clashing with and destroying small groups of local defence detachments.

When they reached Shumilinskaya District Kaparin suggested that they should ride on into the territory of Voronezh Province. He argued that there they

could rely on getting extensive support from the population, which had recently revolted against the Soviet regime. But when Fomin announced this plan to the Cossacks they all declared with one accord: "We won't go out of our own region." Meetings were held in the band. The decision had to be changed. For four days in succession they retreated continually eastward, avoiding a fight with the cavalry force which had pressed on their heels all the way from Kazanskaya District.

It was not easy to cover up their tracks, for everywhere the spring field labour was in progress, and people were at work even in the most remote parts of the steppe. The band retreated during the dark spring nights, but hardly had it halted in the morning to feed the horses when a hostile mounted reconnaissance patrol appeared not far away, a light machine-gun began to rattle, and Fomin's men hurriedly bridled their horses. Beyond the village of Melnikov in Vyesenskaya District Fomin succeeded in tricking the enemy by a clever manoeuvre and got clear away from the pursuit. From the reports of his own reconnaissance patrols he knew that a determined and intelligent Cossack from Bukanovskaya District was in command of the Red cavalry; he also knew that this force was numerically almost twice as large as his own band, had six light machine-guns and fresh horses which had not been exhausted by long marches. All these circumstances rendered it necessary to avoid a battle, so that his men and horses could rest. Then, when the opportunity presented itself, he must break up the Red cavalry not in open fight, but by a sudden

onslaught, and so shake off the incessant pursuit. In this way he might also be able to obtain machine-guns and rifle bullets at the expense of the enemy.

But his calculations proved to be mistaken. Grigory's fears for the band were fully confirmed on April 18. The previous evening Fomin and the majority of the rank and file had drunk heavily. At dawn they left the village where they had halted. During the night hardly a man had had any sleep, and now many of them dozed in their saddles. Towards nine o'clock in the morning they made a halt on the outskirts of a wood not far from the village of Ozhogin. Fomin posted guards and gave orders for the horses to be fed with oats.

A strong, gusty wind was blowing from the east. Brown clouds of sandy dust lowered over the horizon wrapping the steppe in gloom which the sun could scarcely pierce. The wind snatched at the edges of the men's greatcoats, at the horses' manes and tails. The animals turned their backs to it and sought shelter close to the bushes of hawthorn scattered about the fringe of the forest. The men's eyes streamed with the prickling, sandy dust, and it was difficult to see anything even at a short distance.

Grigory carefully wiped his horse's muzzle and eyes, hung the oat-basket round its neck, and went to Kaparin, who was feeding his horse on oats poured into the fold of his greatcoat.

"A fine spot you've chosen for the halt!" Grigory remarked, pointing to the forest with his whip.

Kaparin shrugged his shoulders.

"So I told that fool, but you can't argue with him."

"We should have halted out in the steppe or on the outskirts of a village."

"Do you think we can expect an attack from the forest?"

"Yes, I do."

"The enemy is a long way off."

"The enemy may be quite close; they're not infantry."

"The forest is bare; we shall see them if they come."

"There's nobody to see them; nearly everybody's asleep. I'm afraid the guards may be asleep too!"

"They're not in a fit state to stand up after last night's bout, you won't rouse them now!" Kaparin frowned as though he were in pain and said in an undertone: "We shall be lost with such a leader. He's as empty as a bottle, and stupid, quite incredibly stupid. Why don't you want to take over the command? The Cossacks respect you. They'd follow you willingly."

"I don't want to; I'm only a passing guest here," Grigory dryly answered. He went off to his horse, regretting the indiscreet confession which had fallen from his lips.

Kaparin poured the rest of the oats out of his greatcoat on to the ground and hastened after Grigory.

"You know, Melekhov," he said as he walked along, breaking off a twig of thorn and pinching the tight, swollen buds, "I don't think we shall be able to hold out for long if we don't join up with some large anti-Soviet force—with Maslak's brigade, for instance. He's roaming about somewhere in the south of the pro-

vince. We must break through to him or we'll be massacred here one fine day."

"It's flood-time now. We can't get across the Don."

"Not now. But when the water falls we must retreat. Don't you agree?"

After some reflection Grigory answered: "You're right. We must clear out of this area. There's no sense in hanging around here."

Kaparin began to talk enthusiastically. He expatiated on the theme that their expectations of support had not been justified, and that now they must somehow or other persuade Fomin not to go on roaming aimlessly about the region, but to decide to link up with a stronger force.

Grigory grew tired of listening to his chatter. He kept his eyes fixed on his horse. As soon as the basket was empty he took it off, bridled the animal, and tightened the saddle-girths.

"We shan't be moving on for a long time yet; there's no need for all that hurry," Kaparin said.

"You'd do better to go and get your horse ready, there won't be time to saddle it later!" Grigory answered.

Kaparin stared hard at him, then went to his mount, which was standing close to the line of wagons.

Leading his horse by the rein, Grigory went across to Fomin. The commander was lying on his cloak with his legs spread wide, lazily gnawing the wing of a boiled chicken. He shifted, and beckoned to Grigory to sit down beside him.

"Sit down here and have a rest."

"We must get away, now's not the time for rest," Grigory said.

"We'll finish feeding the horses and then we'll move on."

"We can finish feeding them later."

"What are you in such a hurry for?" Fomin threw away the picked bone and wiped his hands on his cloak.

"They'll get us here. It's just the right spot for it."

"How the devil can they? The patrol's only just come in and reported that there's not a soul to be seen on the hill. They must have lost track of us or they'd be on our tail now. We needn't expect any attack from Bukanovskaya District. The military commissar there is a good fighting lad, but he hasn't got much of a force at his command, and he's hardly likely to come out and face us. We'll have a proper rest, wait for the wind to die down, then set off again. Sit down and have some chicken; what are you standing over me like that for? It seems to me you've turned coward, Melekhov. Soon you'll be riding round every bush you come to, like this." He swept his hand round in a great semicircle and laughed heartily.

Cursing violently, Grigory went off, tied his horse to a bush, and lay down beside it, protecting his face from the wind with the edge of his greatcoat. Lulled by the whistle of the wind, and the fine, singing rustle of the tall dry grass bowed above him, he fell into a doze.

He was brought to his feet by a long burst of machine-gun fire. Before it ended he had his horse untethered. Above all the other voices rose Fomin's

shout: "To horse!" Now two or three more machine-guns began to stutter from the forest on the right. Mounting his horse, Grigory took stock of the situation at a glance. To the right, on the edge of the forest, scarcely visible through the dust clouds, some fifty Red Army men were advancing into the attack, cutting off the line of retreat to the hills. Above their heads their swords glittered coldly, a familiar bluish hue in the dim light of the sun. From a bushy mound in the forest, machine-guns were firing, emptying disk after disk with feverish haste. To the left also about half a squadron of Red Army men were galloping along without a shout, waving their sabres, rushing to complete the encirclement. There was only one way of escape: to break through the thin line of men attacking from the left and to retreat towards the Don. Grigory shouted to Fomin: "Keep up behind me!" and put his horse into a gallop, drawing his sabre.

When he had covered some forty yards he looked back. Fomin, Kaparin, Chumakov, and several other men were following at a furious gallop some twenty yards behind him. The machine-guns in the forest had stopped firing; only the one on the extreme right was rattling away with short, angry bursts at the Fomin men scrambling around the baggage-wagons. Then that last machine-gun also fell silent, and Grigory realized that the attackers were now right on top of the camp, and that the men left behind were being sabred. He guessed it from the desperate shouts, and the occasional shots fired by the defenders. But he had no time to look back. As his horse carried him impetuously towards the stream of men advancing

against him, he chose his man. A soldier in a short sheepskin was galloping towards him on a grey, not very fast horse. As though in a flash of lightning, for one elusive moment Grigory saw the horse with its white, foam-flecked chest, the rider, his youthful face flushed with excitement, and behind him the broad, sombre expanse of the steppe stretching away to the Don. The next moment he would have to avoid a blow and wield his sabre. When some ten yards from the rider, Grigory swung his body sharply over to the left. He heard the cutting whistle of a sabre above his head and, jerking himself upright in the saddle, touched the man on the head with the very point of his sabre as he passed. His hand hardly felt the force of the blow, but, looking back, he saw the man sag and slowly slip out of the saddle and saw a thick stream of blood on the back of his yellow sheepskin coat. The grey horse slackened down into a fast trot, running sideways as though afraid of its own shadow, its head carried wildly high in the air.

Grigory dropped over his horse's neck and instinctively lowered his sabre. The bullets whistled thinly and sharply over his head. The animal's ears quivered as they lay flat against its head, with beads of sweat at the tips. Grigory heard only the fierce whistle of bullets fired after him and the sharp, panting breath of his horse. He looked back again and saw Fomin and Chumakov; Kaparin was a good hundred yards behind them and, still farther off, only one man of the Second Troop, the lame Sterlyadnikov, was fighting his way past the two soldiers who rode to attack him. All the other eight or nine men who had fled after

Fomin had been sabred. Their tails waving in the wind, the riderless horses were fleeing in all directions, to be followed and caught by Red Army men. Only one high-standing bay belonging to a Fomin man was galloping along at Kaparin's side, snorting and dragging its dead master, who had not been able to free his foot from the stirrup as he fell.

Beyond the sandy rise Grigory halted his horse, jumped out of the saddle, and thrust his sabre into its scabbard. It took him only a few seconds to make his horse lie down, a trick he had taught it in a single week. From behind this cover he fired all his clip of cartridges; his aim was hurried and agitated, however, and only with his last bullet did he send a horse down under a Red Army man. But it enabled the fifth Fomin man to draw away from the pursuit.

"Mount! They'll get you!" Fomin shouted as he drew level with Grigory.

The massacre was complete. Of the entire band only five men escaped. They were pursued as far as the village of Antonovsky, and the chase did not end till the fugitives hid in the forest surrounding the village.

In all that mad gallop not one of the five said a word.

Close to a little river Kaparin's horse fell, and they could not get it on to its legs again. Under the others the hard-driven horses were staggering, hardly able to move their legs, scattering thick white clots of foam on the ground.

"You ought to be minding sheep, not commanding a detachment!" Grigory said, dismounting and not looking at Fomin.

Without speaking Fomin slipped from his horse and began to unsaddle it. But he went off without removing the saddle and sat down on a hummock overgrown with bracken.

"Well, we'll have to abandon the horses," he said, looking fearfully about him.

"And then?" Chumakov asked.

"And then we must make our way on foot to the other side of the Don."

"Where to?"

"We'll stop in the forest till nightfall, then we'll get across the Don and hide for the time being in Rubezhny. I've got lots of relations there."

"Another idiotic idea!" Kaparin exclaimed furiously. "Don't you think they'll look for you there? That's just where they're going to expect you now. What do you use for thinking with?"

"Well, where else are we to go?" Fomin asked in a distracted tone.

Grigory took the bullets and a piece of bread out of his saddle-bags and said: "Are you thinking of spending much time over your talk? Come on! Tie up the horses, unsaddle them, and get going, or the Reds will get us even here."

Chumakov threw his whip on the ground, trod it into the mire and said in a quivering voice: "And so we're on foot now! And all our boys have gone under! Mother of God, how they shook us up! I didn't think I was going to come through today alive. . . . Death looked me in the eyes."

Without speaking they unsaddled their horses, tied all the four to one alder bush, and, in single file,

stepping in each other's tracks, like wolves, they made their way down to the Don, carrying their saddles in their arms, keeping wherever possible to the denser undergrowth.

XIV

In spring-time, when the Don overflows its banks and the flood water covers all the low-lying water-meadows, opposite the village of Rubezhny a small stretch of the lofty left bank remains high and dry above the water.

From the Don-side hills this island, densely covered with young willows, oaks, and the spreading dove-blue osier bushes can be seen from a long way off.

In the summer the trees are entwined with wild hops to their very crowns, the ground below is spread with impenetrable, prickly dew-berry bushes; pale-blue bindweed crawls and twines over the bushes, and in the few glades the tall, thick grass, munificently nourished by rich soil, grows higher than a man.

In the summer even at noonday it is quiet, twilight, and cool in the forest. Only the orioles disturb the silence, and the cuckoos vie with one another in counting out somebody's unspent years. But in winter-time the woods stand completely deserted, bare, fettered in a deathly silence. The serrated edges of the tree-tops stand out in sombre black against the pallid, wintry sky. Only the wolves' litters find a safe shelter in the thickets year after year, spending their days lying in the snow-laden scrub.

On this island Fomin, Grigory Melekhov, and the others who had scaped from the massacre of the band set up their quarters. They lived as best they could, eating the miserable victuals which Fomin's cousin brought them by boat at night. They were half starved, but they could sleep their fill, with their saddle pomels under their heads. They took turns at keeping guard during the night. They lit no fire, for fear that someone would discover their hiding-place.

Washing round the island, the flood water streamed southward. It roared menacingly as it broke through the barrier of old poplars which stood in its path, then murmured on in a lulled, singing tone, setting the tops of the inundated bushes swaying.

Grigory quickly grew accustomed to the never ceasing sound of the water near by. He lay for long hours by the steeply cut bank and gazed at the broad watery expanse, at the chalky spurs of the Don-side hills enveloped in a sunny lilac haze. There, beyond that haze, was his native village ... Aksinya ... his children. And thither flew his cheerless thoughts. Momentarily a longing blazed up and consumed him as he recalled his dear ones, an impotent hatred for Mikhail seethed within him. But he suppressed these feelings and tried not to look at the Don-side hills. There was no point in giving the rein to unhappy memories. Life was sad enough as it was. Already he had such a pain in his breast that sometimes it seemed to him that his heart had been pierced and was no longer beating, but was streaming with blood. Evidently his wounds, the hardships of war, and typhus had done their work: he was continually aware of the

importunate thumping of his heart. Sometimes the lacerating pain in his chest, under the left nipple, grew so unbearably sharp that his lips went dry and he had difficulty in choking back a groan. But he found a sure method of freeing himself from the pain: he would lie down with his left side against the damp earth, or wet his shirt with cold water; and then the pain slowly, almost, it seemed, reluctantly, left his body.

The days turned fine and still. Only occasionally did small white clouds, tousled by a wind high above, go floating across the clear sky, their reflections slipping like a flight of swans over the flood water, to vanish as they touched the distant shore.

It was good to gaze at the swift current furiously seething along by the bank, to listen to the myriad sounds of the water and not to think of anything, to try not to think of anything which caused him suffering. He gazed for hours at the whimsical and endlessly changing swirl of the current. The ripples altered their forms continually; where a smooth stream had flowed, bearing on its surface stalks of reeds, crumpled leaves, and clumps of grass torn away by the roots, a fantastically curving funnel would appear which greedily sucked down all that floated within reach of it; then a little later the funnel would disappear, and in its place the water would boil and swirl in turbid eddies, throwing to the surface now the blackened root of a sedge, now an outspread oak leaf, now a bunch of straw carried down from no one knew where.

In the evenings the cherry-red afterglow burned in the west. The moon rose from behind a lofty poplar.

Its light spread over the Don in a cold white flame, broken into reflections and pools of black where the wind rippled the water. At night, blended with the murmur of the water, the cries of innumerable flocks of northward-flying geese sounded incessantly over the island. The birds, with no one to disturb them, often settled on the eastern side of the island. Over the backwaters, through the inundated forest the male teal called challengingly, ducks quacked, the barnacles and geese quietly cackled and answered one another. One day, noiselessly making his way to the bank, Grigory saw a large flock of swans not far from the island. The sun had not yet risen. The morning glow was flickering brilliantly beyond the barrier of the forest. Reflecting its light, the water seemed rosy, and the great, majestic birds, with their heads turned to the sunrise, seemed rose-coloured also. Hearing a rustle on the bank, they flew up with a sonorous trumpet-call, and when they rose above the forest, Grigory was dazzled by the astonishing gleam of their snowy plumage.

Fomin and the others killed time each in his own fashion. Making his lame leg comfortable, the industrious Sterlyadnikov worked from morn till night mending clothes and boots and carefully cleaning his weapons. Kaparin, whose health had not been improved by sleeping on the damp ground at night, lay for days on end in the sun, coughing hollowly, covered up to his head in his sheepskin. Fomin and Chumakov played endlessly with home-made cards cut out of paper. Grigory wandered about the island and squatted for hours beside the water. They talked but little to

one another—all they had to say had been said long since—and they came together only at meal-times and of an evening, while waiting for Fomin's cousin to arrive. They were overcome by boredom, and during all their stay on the island only once did Grigory see Chumakov and Sterlyadnikov, for some reason suddenly feeling light-hearted, begin to wrestle. They stamped about for a long time on one spot, grunting and exchanging curt jesting remarks. Their feet sank to their ankles in the coarse white sand. The lame Sterlyadnikov was obviously the stronger, but Chumakov was the more agile. They wrestled with their arms around each other's waist, their shoulders thrust forward, each keenly watching the other's legs. Their faces grew set and pale with the strain, their breathing spasmodic and violent. Grigory watched the struggle with interest. Choosing a fitting moment, Chumakov suddenly threw himself down on his back, dragging his opponent with him, and with a movement of his bent legs threw Sterlyadnikov over his head. A second later, as supple and nimble as a polecat, Chumakov was lying on top of Sterlyadnikov, pressing his shoulder-blades into the sand, while the other belled, panting and laughing: "But you're cheating. We didn't agree that we could throw each other over our heads."

"You went for each other like young fighting-cocks; but that's enough for now, or you'll be fighting in earnest," Fomin said.

But they had no intention of fighting. Amicably, with arms interlocked, they sat down on the sand, and Chumakov, in a thick but pleasant bass, broke

into a song. Sterlyadnikov took it up in his thin tenor voice, and they sang in harmony and unexpectedly well.

But suddenly Sterlyadnikov could not restrain himself any more: he jumped up and, snapping his fingers, kicking the sand about with his lame leg, began to dance. Without stopping his singing Chumakov took his sword, dug a shallow hole in the sand, and said:

"Wait a bit, you lame devil! One of your legs is shorter than the other, you can't dance properly on level ground. . . . Either you dance on a slope or else have your longer leg in a hole and the other outside. Put your sound leg in this hole, and then dance, you'll see how well it works. Now, off we go!"

Sterlyadnikov wiped the sweat from his brow and obediently set his good leg into the hole Chumakov had dug.

"But you're right, it does make it easier," he said.

Panting with laughter, Chumakov clapped his hands and began to sing very fast. And Sterlyadnikov, his face set in the serious expression common to all dancers, began dancing nimbly and even attempted to squat down on his haunches and kick out his legs.

The days passed on, each exactly like the one before. With the coming of darkness they waited impatiently for Fomin's cousin to arrive. All five of them gathered on the bank, talking in undertones, smoking, concealing the lighted ends of their cigarettes under the edges of their greatcoats. They had decided to stay for another week on the island and then to cross at night for the right bank of the Don, snatch

horses, and set out for the south. Rumour had it that Maslak's brigade was still roaming somewhere in the south of the region.

Fomin charged his relations to discover where he could get suitable horses, and also told them to report each day all that occurred in the area. The news they brought in was reassuring: Fomin was being searched for on the left bank of the Don, and although Red Army men had visited Rubezhny, after searching his house they had at once ridden off again.

"We must clear out of here quickly! What the hell is the good of sticking here? Let's clear out tomorrow," Chumakov proposed one day at breakfast.

"We must find out about the horses first," Fomin said. "What's the hurry? If only they fed us better I wouldn't give up this comfortable life until winter. Look how beautiful it is all around! We'll have a good rest, and then we'll set out again. Let them fish for us, we won't let ourselves be caught so easily! They smashed us owing to my stupidity, I know, and of course it's a pity, but it isn't everything. We'll collect more men again. As soon as we mount horses we'll ride through the nearest villages, and in a week we'll have half a squadron around us, and possibly a full company. We'll get the men we need, you see if we don't."

"Nonsense! Overweening arrogance!" Kaparin said irritably. "The Cossacks have let us down. They haven't followed us, and they won't. We must have the courage to look the truth in the eyes and not delude ourselves with idiotic hopes."

"Why won't they follow us?"

"Well, they didn't at first and so they won't now."

"We shall see!" Fomin retorted in a challenging tone. "I won't lay down my arms!"

"That's all empty talk!" Kaparin said wearily.

"You devil's head!" the infuriated Fomin exclaimed. "What are you spreading panic here for? You're worse than horse-radish with your tears and moaning! What did we rise at all for, then? Why did you come in, if your guts are so weak? It was you who egged me on to start the rising, but now you want to crawl out of it. Haven't you got anything to say?"

"I've got nothing to say to you, you can go to the devil, you fool!" Kaparin exclaimed hysterically, and went off shivering, wrapping himself in his sheepskin and turning up the collar.

"These well-born folk are always thin-skinned! As soon as anything happens they've had enough, they're done," Fomin said with a sigh.

They sat silent for some time, listening to the steady, powerful roar of the water. A duck pursued by two drakes flew over their heads with a grating croak. An excitedly chattering flock of starlings dropped down over the glade, but, seeing the men, swept up again, twisting like a black braid as they went.

A little later Kaparin came back.

"I want to go to the village tonight," he said looking at Fomin and blinking hard.

"What for?"

"That's a strange question! Can't you see I've got a bad chill and can hardly keep on my feet?"

"Well, and what of it? Will you lose your chill in

the village, do you think?" Fomin asked with imperturbable calm.

"I must have at least a few nights in a warm place."

"You're not going anywhere!" Fomin said firmly.

"What, am I to perish here?"

"Please yourself."

"But why can't I go? These nights sleeping out in the cold will be the death of me."

"And supposing you're caught in the village? Have you thought of that? Then they'll finish us all off. Do you think I don't know you? At the first examination you'll betray us. And you'll do it even before that, on the road to Vyeshenskaya."

Chumakov burst into a laugh and nodded approvingly. He completely agreed with Fomin. But Kaparin said obstinately: "I must go. Your brilliant guesses won't make me change my mind."

"But I've told you to sit still for the time being."

"But don't you understand, Yakov Yefimovich, that I can't go on living this animal life any longer? I've got pleurisy, and possibly even pneumonia."

"You'll get over it. You'll lie about in the sun and get well."

"Anyhow I'm going today," Kaparin declared sharply. "You have no right to restrain me. I'll go whatever happens."

Fomin gazed at him, suspiciously screwed up his eyes, and, winking at Chumakov, rose to his feet.

"It looks to me, Kaparin, as though you really have fallen ill. . . . You must have a high temperature. . . . Let me see whether your head's hot!" He took several steps towards Kaparin, stretching out one hand.

Evidently Kaparin noticed the unpleasant look on Fomin's face, for he fell back and shouted: "Get away!"

"Don't shout! What are you making that noise for? I'm only going to find out. What's the matter with you?" Fomin strode to Kaparin and seized him by the throat. "Want to give yourself up, you swine?" he muttered thickly and strained to throw Kaparin to the ground.

Grigory had difficulty in separating them and had to exert all his strength.

After dinner Kaparin went up to Grigory as he was hanging some washing on a bush and said: "I'd like to talk to you alone. . . . Let's sit down." They sat down on a fallen, rotting poplar trunk.

Coughing hollowly, Kaparin said: "What do you think of that idiot's behaviour? I'm sincerely grateful to you for your intervention. You acted nobly, as an officer should. But this is terrible! I can't stand any more. We're living like animals. . . . How many days is it now since we ate hot food? And then this sleeping on the damp earth. . . . I've caught a chill, and my side is hurting me terribly. I must have developed pneumonia. I badly want to sit by a fire, to sleep in a warm room, to change my underclothes. I dream of fresh clean shirts, of sheets. . . . No, I can't go on!"

Grigory smiled and asked: "Did you think we were going to fight with every comfort?"

"But listen, what sort of war is this?" Kaparin answered energetically. "This isn't war, but endless wandering, murdering individual Soviet workers, and then fleeing. It would be war if the people supported

us, if a rising were to break out. But to call this war—no, this isn't war!"

"There's nothing else we can do. You don't want us to surrender, do you?"

"You're right, but what are we to do?"

Grigory shrugged his shoulders. He gave voice to the thought which had frequently entered his mind as he lay about on the island: "Poor freedom is better than a good prison. You know how the saying goes: 'A strong prison, but it only pleases the devil!'"

Kaparin drew patterns on the sand with a twig. After a long silence he said: "We haven't necessarily got to surrender, but we've got to find new forms of struggle against the Bolsheviks. We must get shot of this disgusting scum. You're an educated man..."

"Why do you think so?" Grigory laughed. "Why, I can hardly even pronounce that word."

"You're an officer."

"By accident."

"No, joking apart, you are an officer, you've grafted yourself into officers' society, you've seen real men, you're not a Soviet upstart like Fomin, and you must realize that it's senseless for us to remain here. It's the equivalent to suicide. He was the cause of our being smashed up in the forest, and if we continue to throw in our lot with him he'll do the same again more than once. He's simply a cad, and an obstreperous fool into the bargain! We shall be lost if we stay with him."

"So you don't suggest surrendering, but leaving Fomin? Where are we to go to? To Maslak?" Grigory asked.

"No. He's just another adventurer, only on a larger scale. I take a different view of all this now. We must go not to Maslak—"

"Then where?"

"To Vyeshenskaya."

Grigory shrugged his shoulders irritably.

"I call that throwing good money after bad. It's not to my liking."

Kaparin looked at him sharply with glittering eyes.

"You haven't understood, Melekhov. Can I trust you?"

"Completely."

"On the word of honour of an officer?"

"On the word of honour of a Cossack."

Kaparin glanced in the direction of Fomin and Chumakov, and, although they were a considerable distance away and could not have overheard the conversation, he lowered his voice: "I know your relations with Fomin and the others. You're just as much a foreign body among them as I am. I'm not interested in the reasons which have led you to fight against the Soviet regime. If I understand aright, it's because of your past and your fear of arrest, isn't it?"

"You've just said you're not interested in the reasons."

"Yes, yes, that was only by the way. Now for a few words about myself. Formerly I was an officer and a member of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party, but later I completely revised my political convictions. . . . Only the monarchy can save Russia. Only the monarchy! Providence itself points this road for our

native country. The emblem of the Soviet Government is a hammer and sickle, a '*molot*' and a '*serp*,' isn't it?" With the twig Kaparin drew the words "*molot*" and "*serp*" on the sand, then fixed his feverishly burning eyes on Grigory's face. "Now read each of those words backward. You have? Do you understand? Only 'prestolom,' only 'through the throne,' will the Revolution and the Bolshevik regime be ended. Do you know I was possessed with mystical horror when I discovered that. I trembled, for, if you like to put it so, it is God's finger pointing to the end of our troubles."

Kaparin was silent, panting with agitation. His keen eyes had a hint of madness in them as he gazed at Grigory. But Grigory did not tremble at all and did not feel any mystical horror as he heard Kaparin's revelation. He had a more sober and matter-of-fact view of things, and so he said in answer: "That's no finger. Were you at the front during the German war?"

Perplexed by the question, Kaparin did not answer at once.

"But why do you ask? No, I was not actually at the front."

"Then where did you go through the war? At the rear?"

"Yes."

"All the time?"

"Yes. I mean, not all the time, but almost all. But why do you ask?"

"Well, I've been at the front continually from 1914 down to the present day, with only a few breaks. And

in regard to your finger—How can it be God's finger, when God himself doesn't exist? I gave up believing that nonsense long ago. Ever since 1915, when I got my first sight of war, I've been thinking that God doesn't exist. Not at all! If he did, he would have no right to allow people to do such things as they do! We front-line men have got rid of God, he's only for the women and old men now. Let them find comfort in him. There isn't any finger, and there can't be any monarchy. The people have put an end to that once and for all. And this game you're playing, this twisting letters about—that, if you don't mind my saying so, is a kid's trick and nothing more. And I don't understand what you're telling me all this for. You must speak more simply and plainly. I've never studied in a cadets' academy and I'm not too well educated, even though I was an officer. If I'd been better educated perhaps I wouldn't be sitting with you here on this island, like a wolf cut off by a flood," he ended with an obvious note of regret in his voice.

"That doesn't matter," Kaparin said hurriedly. "It doesn't matter whether you believe in God or not. That's a question for your own conviction, your conscience. Nor does it matter in the least whether you're a monarchist or a supporter of the Constituent Assembly, or just a Cossack fighting for self-government. What does matter is that we're united by a single attitude to the Soviet regime. Do you agree?"

"Go on."

"We put our hopes in a general rising of the Cossacks, didn't we? That hope has proved unjustified. Now we've got to find a way out. We can still fight

the Bolsheviks, and not only under Fomin's leadership! The important thing now is to save our own lives, and that is why I'm proposing an alliance with you."

"What sort of alliance? Who against?"

"Against Fomin."

"I don't get you."

"It's all very simple. I invite you to be my accomplice." Kaparin grew obviously agitated and panted violently as he went on: "You and I will kill these three and go to Vyesenskaya, understand? That will save us. That service to the Soviet Government will save us from punishment. We shall live. You understand? We shall live. We shall save our lives. It goes without saying that when the opportunity occurs we shall fight against the Bolsheviks again. But that will be when it's a serious business, and not some adventure like the present with this wretched Fomin. Do you agree? Bear in mind that this is the only way out of the present desperate situation, and a brilliant one at that."

"But how is it to be done?" Grigory asked. Inwardly he was quivering with indignation, but with all his strength he attempted to hide the feeling which had seized him.

"I've thought it all out: we'll do it at night, with cool steel. Then the next night the Cossack who supplies us with food will come across, we'll cross the Don, and that's all. It's marvellously simple, and no cunning called for at all!"

Smiling, Grigory said with feigned affability: "That sounds fine! But tell me, Kaparin, when you wanted

to go to the village to get warm this morning—were you intending to go to Vyeshenskaya? Did Fomin hit the mark?”

Kaparin stared closely at Grigory's amiably smiling face and returned his smile, wanly and a little embarrassed.

“I'll tell you frankly, I was. You know, when it's a question of your own skin you don't show any particular regard about the choice of method.”

“So you'd have betrayed us?”

“Yes,” Kaparin openly admitted. “But I'd have tried to spare you personally any unpleasantness if they'd caught you here on the island.”

“But why didn't you kill us all yourself? That would have been easy enough to do at night.”

“There was the risk. While I was dealing with one, the others. . . .”

“Lay down your arms!” Grigory said in a repressed tone, snatching out his pistol. “Lay them down or I'll shoot you on the spot! I'm getting up now, and I'll cover you so that Fomin can't see, and then you'll throw your pistol down at my feet. Well? Don't think of shooting! I'll put you out at the first sign.”

Kaparin sat still, turning deathly pale. “Don't kill me!” he whispered, hardly moving his white lips.

“I shan't. But I'll take your weapons.”

“You'll betray me. . . .”

Tears rolled down Kaparin's hairy cheeks. Grigory frowned with loathing and pity and raised his voice.

“Throw down your pistol! I won't betray you, though I ought to. Why, what a cur you've proved yourself to be! A dirty cur!”

Kaparin threw his pistol at Grigory's feet.

"How about your Browning? Hand over your Browning. It's in the breast pocket of your tunic."

Kaparin threw down the gleaming, nickel-plated Browning and covered his face with his hands. He shook with the sobs which convulsed him.

"Stop it, you scum!" Grigory said sharply, with difficulty controlling his desire to strike Kaparin.

"You'll betray me! I'm lost..."

"I've told you I won't. But as soon as we leave the island you can make yourself scarce! No one wants your kind. You can find your own shelter."

Kaparin removed his hands from his face. His wet, livid cheeks, swollen eyes, and shaking lower jaw were horrible to look at.

"Then why did you—why did you disarm me?" he stammered.

Grigory said reluctantly: "So that you don't shoot me in the back. Anything is to be expected from men like you—educated men! And there you sat talking about a finger, about the tsar, about God... What a slimy creature you are!"

Without another look at Kaparin, spitting out the copious spittle which filled his mouth again and again, Grigory slowly went back to the others.

Sterlyadnikov was quietly whistling as he sewed up a slit in his saddle with a waxed thread. Fomin and Chumakov were lying on a horse-cloth, playing cards as usual.

Fomin gave Grigory a swift glance and asked: "What was he saying to you? What were you talking about?"

"He was complaining about the life. . . . Just a lot of blabber. . . ."

Grigory kept his promise not to betray Kaparin. But that evening he took a quiet opportunity to remove the bolt from Kaparin's rifle and hid it. "The devil knows what he might try at night," he thought as he lay down to sleep.

Next morning Grigory was awakened by Fomin. Bending over him, Fomin asked quietly: "Did you take Kaparin's weapons from him?"

"What? What weapons?" Grigory raised himself on his elbow, painfully straightening his shoulders. His greatcoat, fur cap, and boots were all wet with the mist which had fallen at sunrise, and he was chilled to the bone.

"We can't find his weapons. Did you take them? Do wake up, Melekhov!"

"Why, yes, I took them. But what's up?"

Fomin went off without speaking. Grigory rose and shook out his greatcoat. Some distance away Chumakov was preparing breakfast: he washed the only dish they possessed, then, pressing a loaf of bread to his chest, cut off four equal hunks, poured milk out of a jug into the dish, and, crumbling a solidly boiled piece of millet porridge, looked at Grigory.

"You've slept late this morning, Melekhov! See where the sun's got to."

"The man with a clear conscience always sleeps well," Sterlyadnikov said as he wiped the wooden spoons on the edge of his greatcoat after washing them. "But Kaparin didn't sleep a wink all night, he tossed and turned. . . ."

Fomin smiled as he looked at Grigory.

"Sit down and have breakfast, brigands," Chumakov proposed. Without waiting for the others he began to spoon up his milk, then bit off a good half of his hunk of bread. Grigory picked up his spoon and, staring hard at the others, asked: "Where's Kaparin?"

Fomin and Sterlyadnikov went on eating in silence. Chumakov gazed fixedly at Grigory, but he too said nothing.

"Where's Kaparin got to?" Grigory asked again, though he had a vague suspicion of what had happened during the night.

"Kaparin's a long way away now," Chumakov answered, smiling imperturbably. "He's floating down to Rostov. I expect he's rocking somewhere about Ust-Khoperskaya. There's his sheepskin hanging up, look..."

"Have you really killed him?" Grigory asked, glancing at Kaparin's sheepskin coat.

There was no point in asking. Everything was quite clear already but for some reason he did ask. At first nobody answered, and he repeated the question.

"Why, of course we've killed him," Chumakov said, and dropped his lashes over his grey, femininely beautiful eyes. "I killed him. That's my job these days, to kill people..."

Grigory looked at him closely. Chumakov's clean, ruddy face was tranquil and even cheerful. His glossy blond whiskers showed up strongly against his sunburned face, setting off the darker hue of his eyebrows and well combed hair. He was genuinely handsome and of modest appearance, was this honoured execu-

tioner to Fomin's band. He laid his spoon down on the tarpaulin, wiped his moustache with the back of his hand, and said: "You can be grateful to Yakov Yefimovich, Melekhov! He was the one who saved your soul, or you'd have been floating down the Don with Kaparin at this moment. . . ."

"What for?"

Spacing out his words, Chumakov said slowly:

"It was clear Kaparin meant to give himself up; and he talked a long time with you yesterday. Well, I and Yakov Yefimovich thought we'd save him from his sin. Can I tell him everything?" He looked inquiringly at Fomin.

Fomin nodded, and Chumakov, his teeth crunching the grains of the badly cooked millet porridge, went on with his story.

"I got an oak cudgel ready yesterday evening, and I said to Yakov Yefimovich: 'I'll settle them both, Kaparin, and Melekhov, during the night.' But he said: 'Finish off Kaparin, but don't touch Melekhov.' So that's what we agreed on. I watched until Kaparin went off to sleep, and I heard you sleeping, snoring away. Well, I crawled up to him and brought the cudgel down on his head. And our staff captain didn't even kick out his legs. He just stretched himself out so sweetly and gave up the ghost. We quietly searched him, then we picked him up by the arms and legs, carried him to the bank, took off his boots, tunic, and sheepskin, and dropped him into the water. But you were still fast asleep and didn't know anything about it. Death stood very close to you last night, Melekhov! It stood right over you. Even though Yakov Yefimo-

vich had said you weren't to be touched, I thought: 'What could they have been talking about yesterday? It's a bad business when two men out of five begin to keep apart from the others and talk secrets.' I crept up to you and wanted to sabre you, because I thought: 'Suppose I hit him with the cudgel, he's a strong devil! He may jump up and start blazing away if I don't put him out with one blow.' But Fomin stopped me again. He came up to me and whispered: 'Don't touch him, he's one of us, we can trust him.' Well, we talked it over, and then we couldn't make out what had happened to Kaparin's weapons. And so I left you in peace. But you certainly slept well; you didn't have any idea what was hanging over you!"

Grigory said calmly: "And you'd have killed me for nothing, you fool! I wasn't in any plot with Kaparin."

"But how is it you've got his weapons?"

Grigory smiled.

"I took his pistols from him yesterday, and took the bolt out of his rifle in the evening and hid it under a saddle-cloth." He went on to tell of his conversation with Kaparin and the captain's proposals.

"But why didn't you say anything about this yesterday?" Fomin asked him displeasedly.

"I felt sorry for him, the snivelling devil!" Grigory confessed frankly.

"Ah, Melekhov, Melekhov!" Chumakov exclaimed, genuinely amazed. "You put your pity where you laid the bolt of Kaparin's rifle; you bury it under a saddle-cloth, for it won't do you any good!"

"Don't you teach me! I know my own business!" Grigory replied coldly.

"Why should I teach you? But supposing as the result of your pity I'd sent you off to the next world for no reason at all last night? Then what?"

"It'd just be good riddance," Grigory quietly answered after a moment's thought. And, more to himself than to the others, he added: "In broad daylight it's terrible for a man to face his death; but when you're asleep it ought to be easy enough. . . ."

XV

One night at the end of April they crossed the Don in a boat. On the bank outside Rubezhny a young Cossack named Alexander Koshelev, from Nizhne-Krivskaya village, was waiting for them.

"I'm coming with you, Yakov Yefimovich," he said as he greeted Fomin. "I'm fed up with life at home."

Fomin nudged Grigory and whispered: "Do you see? I told you so. We've hardly had time to get away from the island, but the people are already—Here they are! He's an acquaintance of mine, a fighting Cossack! This is a good sign. Things will get moving now!"

Judging by his voice, Fomin was smiling with satisfaction. He was evidently delighted by the arrival of a new comrade. The successful crossing of the river and the circumstance that one more man had immediately joined him cheered him up and gave wings to new hopes.

"So besides a rifle and a pistol you've got a sabre

and a pair of field-glasses?" he said in a contented tone, examining and feeling Koshelev's equipment in the darkness. "There's a Cossack for you! You can see at once he's a true Cossack and no mongrel!"

Fomin's cousin drove up to the bank in a wagon drawn by a very small horse.

"Put the saddles in the wagon," he said in an undertone. "And hurry up, for Christ's sake, for the night's getting on, and we've got a long road ahead of us."

He was agitated, and hurried Fomin. But, now he had got away from the island and felt the firm earth of his native village under his feet, Fomin would have been by no means averse to dropping in at his home for an hour or so and visiting village acquaintances.

Just before dawn they selected the best horses from a drove close to the village of Yagodny and saddled them. To the old man minding the drove Chumakov said: "Don't be too upset about the horses, granfer. They're not worth worrying about, and we'll only ride a little way on them. As soon as we find better mounts we'll send these back to their owners. If anyone asks who took the horses, say it was the militia from Krasnokutskaya had them. Let the owners go there. We're chasing a band, you can tell them."

When they reached the main road they said good-bye to Fomin's cousin, then turned off to the left, and all five rode in a south-westerly direction at a fast trot. There were rumours that the Maslak band had appeared not far from Meshkovskaya stanitsa within the past day or two. And in that direction Fomin went, resolved to join up with Maslak.

In search of the Maslak band they roamed for

three days over the steppe tracks on the right bank of the Don, avoiding all large villages and stanitsas. In the Ukrainian villages bounding the lands of Kargin-skaya stanitsa they exchanged their sorry little nags for well-fed and swift Ukrainian horses.

On the morning of the fourth day, not far from a village, Grigory was the first to notice a cavalry column riding across a distant gap between the hills. Not less than two squadrons were coming along the road, while ahead and to either side of them were small reconnaissance detachments.

"Either Maslak, or—" Fomin put his field-glasses to his eyes.

"Either rain or snow; either it is or it isn't," Chumakov said with a sneer. "You take a better look, Yakov Yefimovich, for if it's the Reds, we ought to turn back, and quick!"

"But how the devil can you tell from here?" Fomin said irritably.

"Look! They've spotted us. There's a patrol coming this way," Sterlyadnikov exclaimed.

He was right, they had been seen. The patrol riding on the right-hand side of the column turned sharply and trotted towards them. Fomin hurriedly thrust his glasses into their case; but Grigory, smiling, bent across from his saddle and took Fomin's horse by the bridle.

"Don't be in a hurry! Let them get closer. There are only twelve of them. We'll take a good look at them, and then we can gallop off if necessary. We've got fresh horses, what are you afraid of? Have a look through your glasses."

The twelve horsemen came steadily nearer, growing larger and larger every moment. Their forms were now distinctly outlined against the green background of the tall grass that covered the hill.

Grigory and the others gazed at Fomin impatiently. His hands trembled a little as they held the field-glasses. He stared so hard that a tear ran down the cheek turned to the sun.

"They're Reds! I can see the stars on their caps!" he shouted thickly at last, and turned his horse.

They set off at a gallop. Behind them occasional shots rang out. For two versts or so Grigory galloped at Fomin's side, occasionally looking back.

"Well, we've joined up with them!" he said with a sneering laugh.

Fomin was silent and depressed. Reining in his horse a little, Chumakov shouted: "We must keep clear of the villages. We'll make for the Vyeshenskaya steppe, it's more lonely there."

A few more versts of furious galloping, and the horses would be played out. A foamy sweat covered their outstretched necks and deep folds appeared in their flanks.

"We must take it easier! Slow up!" Grigory commanded.

Of the twelve riders behind them, only nine were left; the others had dropped out of the chase. With his eyes Grigory measured the distance separating them and shouted: "Halt! Let's give them a round or two!"

All five slowed their horses into a trot, slipped to the ground, and unslung their rifles.

"Hold your reins! Aim at the man on the extreme left. Fire!"

They each fired a clip of cartridges, killed a horse under one of the Red Army men, and again began to retire from the pursuit. They were followed only reluctantly. From time to time shots were fired at them from a considerable distance, then at last the soldiers abandoned the chase completely.

"We must water the horses; there's a pond over there," Sterlyadnikov said, pointing with his whip to the blue patch of a steppe pond in the distance.

Now they were riding at a fast walking pace, closely examining every ravine and hollow they came to, trying to take cover in the uneven folds of the steppe.

They watered their horses and set off again, at first at a walking pace, then at a trot. At noon they halted to feed the horses on the slope of a deep ravine which cut right across the steppe. Fomin ordered Koshelev to climb a near-by mound on foot, where he could lie down and keep watch. In the event of horsemen appearing anywhere on the steppe he was to give warning and run immediately to the horses.

Grigory hobbled his mount, turned it loose to graze, and lay down not far off, choosing a dry spot on the slope of the ravine.

Here, on the sunny side of the ravine, the young grass was taller and thicker. The soft breath of the sun-warmed black earth could not stifle the finer perfume of the fading steppe violets. They grew on a stretch of abandoned fallow, popping up among the dry stalks of hart's-clover, spreading in a colourful pattern over the edges of an old field balk; and even

on the flintily hard virgin soil their blue, childishly clear eyes looked out on the world from the withered grass of the previous year. The violets had lived their appointed time in this lonely and spacious steppe, and in their place, on the slope of the ravine, marvellously brilliant tulips were already rising, lifting their crimson, white, and yellow chalices to the sun, while the wind blended the varied perfumes of the flowers and carried them far over the steppe.

Over the steep rubble of the northern slope, shadowed by cliffs, snow still lay caked in slabs, streaming with moisture. A chill arose from the snow, but this chill only brought out the perfume of the fading violets, faint and mournful as the memory of something precious and long since past.

Grigory lay with his legs flung out, resting on his elbows, and gazed with greedy eyes over the sun-hazed steppe, the guardian mounds showing azure along a distant ridge, the flowing opalescent mirage on the bounds of the slope. For a moment he closed his eyes and heard the near and distant songs of the skylarks, the light tread and snorting of the grazing horses, the clanking of bits, and the whisper of the wind in the young grass. He had a strange feeling of resignation and peace as he pressed his body to the rough earth. It was a long familiar feeling. It always came after he had experienced anxiety, and at such times he seemed to see everything around him with fresh vision. It was as though his sight and hearing had grown keener, and after such a time of agitation all that previously would have passed unnoticed now attracted his attention. With equal interest he watched the whistling,

slanting flight of a sparrow-hawk pursuing some tiny bird, and the deliberate crawl of a black beetle which struggled over the distance between his two elbows, and the gentle swaying of a blood-red tulip rocked by the wind, gleaming with a brilliant virgin beauty. The tulip was growing quite close to him, on the edge of a crumbled suslik-burrow. He had only to stretch out his hand to pluck it; but he lay without moving, with silent rapture admiring the flower and the stiff leaves, which jealously preserved drops of the morning dew within their folds. Then he shifted his gaze and long, unthinkingly watched an eagle hovering above the horizon, over a dead city of suslik mounds.

A couple of hours later they again mounted their horses, intending to reach the familiar villages of the Yelanskaya District by nightfall.

Evidently the Red Army patrol had reported their movements by telephone. As they rode into Kamenka settlement shots rang out to welcome them from across a stream. The sing-song whistle of the bullets made Fomin turn aside. Under fire they galloped round the outskirts of the settlement and swiftly made their way into the horse-grazing lands of Vyeshenskaya. Beyond another settlement a small force of militia attempted to intercept them.

"We'll ride round them on the left," Fomin proposed.

"We'll attack them," Grigory said resolutely. "There are nine of them and five of us. We'll break through!"

He was supported by Chumakov and Sterlyadnikov.

Baring their sabres, they put their tired horses into a canter. Without dismounting, the militiamen opened

a rapid fire, then galloped aside, avoiding the attack.

"They're a poor lot! They'll write out a long and glowing report, but they don't want a serious fight!" Koshelev sneered.

Returning the fire whenever the militiamen began to press on them, Fomin and the others retreated eastward, fleeing like wolves pursued by borzois, occasionally snapping back and hardly stopping at all. During one of the exchanges of fire Sterlyadnikov was wounded. The bullet pierced the muscle of his left leg, grazing the bone. He groaned with pain and said turning pale: "They've hit me in the leg. . . . And it's the same leg—my lame one. . . . There's swine for you!"

Throwing himself back in his saddle, Chumakov laughed at the top of his voice. He laughed so much that the tears started to his eyes. As he helped Sterlyadnikov to seat himself on his horse, he shook with laughter.

"Well, how did they come to pick on that one? They must have aimed at it deliberately. They saw a lame fellow hopping about and thought they'd get you if they shot at that leg. Oh, Sterlyadnikov! Oh, you'll be the death of me! Your leg will be shorter by another quarter. And now how will you dance? I shall have to dig a hole a couple of feet deeper for your leg."

"Shut up, you idiot! I haven't got time for you now! Shut up, for Christ's sake!" Sterlyadnikov said, wincing with the pain.

Perhaps half an hour later, as they rode along the bottom of one of the innumerable ravines, he said:

"Let's make a halt and rest a bit. . . . I must stop up my wound, my boot's full of blood."

They halted. Grigory held the horses. From time to time Fomin and Koshelev fired at the militiamen hovering in the distance. Chumakov helped Sterlyadnikov to pull off his boot.

"But you have lost a lot of blood, and no mistake," Chumakov said, knitting his brows as he poured the crimson fluid out of the boot on to the ground. He was about to rip up the leg of Sterlyadnikov's trousers, which were wet and streaming with blood. But Sterlyadnikov would not allow him.

"They're good trousers, there's no point in spoiling them," he said, and, sitting back with his palms on the ground, he raised his wounded leg. "Pull them off, only do it gently."

"Have you got any bandage?" Chumakov asked, rummaging through his pockets.

"What the devil do I want bandages for? I'll manage without."

He examined the outlet of the wound, then pulled a bullet out of its cartridge-case with his teeth, poured the gunpowder on his palm, and thoroughly mixed it with earth, first moistening the earth with spittle. Having plastered both the holes of the wound with this ointment, he said in a satisfied tone: "That's a well-tried remedy. The wound will dry, and it'll heal up in a couple of days."

They did not halt again until they reached the river Chir. The militiamen kept at a respectful distance behind them, firing only occasionally. Fomin frequently looked back, and remarked: "They're keeping us in

sight all the time—or are they expecting reinforcements? They're not keeping that distance off without good reason."

They crossed the Chir at a ford near a village and went at a walking pace up the slope of a hill. The horses were tired out. They managed somehow or other to trot downhill, but they had to be led by the rein uphill, and the men combed the quivering flecks of foam from the animals' sides and haunches.

Fomin's anxiety was justified: some five versts or 'so outside a village the pursuit was taken up by seven men mounted on fresh, briskly moving horses.

"If they go on passing us from hand to hand like that, we're done for," Koshelev said gloomily.

They rode across the steppe, ignoring the tracks, taking turns at firing back. Two of them lay down in the grass and fired at their pursuers, and the others rode on some five hundred yards, dismounted, and kept the enemy under fire while the other two rode on ahead a thousand yards, lay down, and prepared to fire. They killed or seriously wounded one militiaman and shot the horse under a second. Soon afterwards Chumakov had his horse shot under him. He ran on at Koshelev's side, holding to the stirrup.

The shadows lengthened. The sun sank towards the west. Grigory advised that they should not separate, and they rode on together at a walking pace. Chumakov strode along at their side. A little later they saw a two-horse wagon on the ridge of a hill and made for the road. The elderly, bearded Cossack driver whipped his horses into a gallop, but shots brought him to a halt.

"I'll sabre the scum! He'll learn what to run for!" Koshelev muttered through his teeth, bursting ahead, lashing his horse furiously with his whip.

"Don't touch him, Sasha, I forbid it!" Fomin warned him, and shouted to the man when still some distance off: "Unharness your horses, granfer, do you hear? Unharness them while you're still alive!"

Paying no attention to the old man's tearful entreaties, they themselves unhitched the traces, removed the reins and collars from the horses, and quickly saddled them.

"Leave one of yours at least in exchange," the old man begged, weeping.

"Mind you don't get your teeth knocked out, you old devil!" Koshelev said. "We need the horses ourselves. You thank the Lord God that your life has been spared."

Fomin and Chumakov mounted the fresh horses. But soon afterwards the six riders following in their tracks were joined by three others.

"We must get a move on! Come on, boys!" Fomin said. "If we can reach the Krivsky ravines by nightfall, we'll be saved."

He lashed his horse with his whip and galloped on ahead. On his left hand he led a second horse on a short rein. Under the animals' hoofs the crimson heads of the tulips went flying in all directions like great drops of blood. Grigory, who was riding behind Fomin, looked at these sprinkles of crimson and closed his eyes. For some reason he felt dizzy and a sharp familiar pain had gripped his heart.

Their horses galloped along on the verge of ex-

haustion. The men, too, were worn out with the incessant riding and with hunger. Sterlyadnikov was swaying in the saddle, his face as white as linen. He had lost a lot of blood and was tormented by thirst and nausea. He ate a little dry bread, but at once brought it up.

In the dusk, not far from the village of Krivsky they rode into the midst of a drove of horses returning from the steppe, fired a last few shots at their pursuers, and realized joyfully that the chase had been dropped. In the distance the nine horsemen rode together, evidently to discuss the situation, and then turned back.

They spent two days in Krivsky village, staying with an acquaintance of Fomin's. The master was well off and gave them a warm welcome. The horses were kept in a dark shed, had more oats than they could eat, and by the end of the second day had completely recovered from the mad ride. The men took turns at guarding the horses, slept on the floor of a cool chaff-shed festooned with spider-webs, and ate their fill to make up for all the days of semi-starvation they had known on the island.

They could have left the village next day, but Sterlyadnikov held them up: his wound grew worse, a fiery red appeared around its edges, and by evening his leg had swollen and he lost consciousness. He was racked with thirst. All through the night, immediately consciousness returned to him, he asked for water and drank greedily. During the night he drank almost a bucketful of water, but he could not rise even with

help, every movement caused him terrible pain. He made water without getting up and groaned incessantly. To muffle his groans the others carried him to a far corner of the shed, but it made no difference. Sometimes his groans were very loud, and when he lost consciousness he shouted incoherently in his delirium.

They had to keep watch over him also. They gave him water, moistened his burning forehead, and covered his mouth with their hands or a cap when he began to groan or talk too noisily.

Towards the close of the second day he came round and said he felt better.

"When are you leaving here?" he asked Chumakov, beckoning him with his finger.

"Tonight."

"I'm going too. Don't leave me here, for Christ's sake!"

"What good are you for going anywhere?" Fomin said in an undertone. "You can't even stir."

"Can't I? You watch!" With a great effort Sterlyadnikov half raised himself, and at once fell back. His face burned, the sweat stood out in tiny drops on his brow.

"We'll take you," Chumakov said resolutely. "We'll take you, please don't be afraid! And wipe your tears, you're not a woman!"

"It's sweat," Sterlyadnikov whispered quietly, and pulled his cap down over his eyes.

"We'd be glad to leave you behind, but the master won't agree. Don't get downhearted, Vasily. Your leg will heal up, and you and I will yet wrestle again and

dance the Cossack dance. What are you so down in the mouth for? Now, if the wound was serious . . . but it's nothing!"

Chumakov, always harsh and brutish in his dealings with others, said these words so quietly and in such a touchingly gentle and sincere tone that Grigory stared at him in amazement.

They rode out of the village a little before dawn. They managed with a struggle to get Sterlyadnikov into the saddle, but he could not keep his seat and fell first to one side, then to the other. So Chumakov rode beside him, with his right arm around the wounded man's waist.

"There's a drag on us! We'll have to leave him behind somewhere," Fomin whispered, drawing level with Grigory and regretfully shaking his head.

"Kill him, do you mean?"

"Well, what else? Look into his eyes? What can we do with him on our hands?"

They rode for some time at a walking pace, not speaking. Grigory relieved Chumakov, then Koshelev relieved Grigory.

The sun rose. Below them the mist was still rolling above the Don, but on the hills the steppe distances were very clear and bright, and with every minute the vault of heaven turned more blue, with feathery little clouds frozen motionless in the zenith. A heavy dew lay in a silvery brocade on the grass, but where the horses had passed, a dark flowing track was left. Only the skylarks disturbed the great and blessed silence which enveloped the steppe.

Sterlyadnikov, his head tossing helplessly to the

movement of the horse's stride, said quietly: "Oh, it's hard!"

"Shut up!" Fomin roughly interrupted him. "It's no easier for us having to nurse you."

Not far from the Hetman's highway a bustard shot up from under their horses' hoofs. The whirring of its wings aroused Sterlyadnikov from his oblivion.

"Brothers, get me off my horse," he asked.

Koshelev and Chumakov carefully lifted him out of the saddle and laid him on the wet grass.

"Let's have a look at your leg. Now, unbutton your trousers!" Chumakov said, squatting down beside him.

Sterlyadnikov's leg was monstrously swollen, the skin was stretched tightly without a single wrinkle, and it filled all his ample trouser leg. Right up to his hip the skin had turned a shiny dark-violet hue and was covered with spots that were velvety to the touch. Similar spots, only of a lighter tinge, had made their appearance on his swarthy, deeply sunken belly. A foul, putrescent stench came from the wound and from the brown blood dried on his trousers, and Chumakov held his nose, knitted his brows, and could hardly restrain the nausea which rose in his throat as he examined his friend's leg. Then he gazed closely at Sterlyadnikov's drooping blue eyelids, exchanged glances with Fomin, and said: "It looks as though gangrene's set in.... M'yes! You're in a bad way, Vasily Sterlyadnikov! A very bad way indeed! Ah, Vasya, Vasya, why on earth did it happen to you?"

Sterlyadnikov was breathing in hurried gasps and did not say a word. Fomin and Grigory dismounted as though at a command and approached the wounded

man from the windward side. He lay still for a time, then, supporting himself on his hands, sat up and looked at them all with bloodshot eyes, stern in their resignation.

"Brothers, give me over to death. . . . I'm no longer a living soul in this world. . . . I'm worn out, I haven't got any more strength. . . ."

He again lay down on his back and closed his eyes. Fomin and the others had been expecting such a request. Winking briefly at Koshelev, Fomin turned away. Koshelev made no protest and snatched the rifle from his shoulder. "Shoot!" he rather guessed than heard the words as he looked at the lips of Chumakov, who had stepped away. But Sterlyadnikov again opened his eyes, and said firmly:

"Shoot here!" He raised his hand and pointed with his finger to the bridge of his nose. "So that the light goes out at once. . . . If you happen to be in my village, tell the wife how it happened. . . . Tell her she's not to wait for me."

Koshelev seemed to fiddle a suspiciously long time with the bolt of his rifle, and, drooping his eyelids, Sterlyadnikov had time to add: "I've only got the wife—no children. She had one, but it was born dead. . . . And there weren't any more."

Twice Koshelev threw the rifle up and let it fall again, turning more and more pale. Chumakov furiously pushed him away with his shoulder and tore the weapon from his hands.

"If you can't do it, then don't take on the job, you puppy!" he shouted hoarsely, and took off his cap and stroked his hair.

"Hurry!" Fomin demanded, putting one foot into the stirrup.

Groping for the words he needed, Chumakov said slowly and quietly: "Vasily, good-bye, and forgive me and all of us, for the love of Christ! We'll meet again in the next world, and there they'll judge us. . . . We'll tell your wife what you asked." Chumakov waited for an answer; but Sterlyadnikov was silent, and his face paled as he awaited his death. Only his sun-bleached eye-lashes fluttered, as though in the wind, and the fingers of his left hand quietly stirred as for some reason he attempted to fasten a broken button on his tunic.

Many deaths had Grigory seen in his time, but he did not stop to watch the death of Sterlyadnikov. He hurriedly walked on, pulling hard on the reins as he led his horse behind him. He waited for the shot with the same feeling that he would have had if the bullet were intended for his own head. He waited for the shot, and his heart counted out every second. But when behind him there was a sharp, sudden crack his knees sagged under him, and he was hardly able to restrain his rearing horse.

For a couple of hours they rode without speaking. When they halted, Chumakov was the first to break the silence. Covering his eyes with his palm, he said huskily:

"What the devil did I shoot him for? We ought to have left him behind in the steppe and not put an unnecessary sin on my soul. I can see him now before my eyes. . . ."

"Won't you ever get used to it?" Fomin asked.

"With all the men you've killed, you still can't get used to it? Yours isn't a heart, it's just a lump of rusty iron. . . ."

Chumakov paled, and stared furiously at Fomin.

"Don't you get across me just now, Yakov Yefimovich!" he said quietly. "Don't you peck at me, or I'll plug you. Yes, even you. And very easily too!"

"Why should I get across you? I've got enough worry without you!" Fomin said in a conciliatory tone, and lay on his back, screwing up his eyes in the sunlight and stretching himself contentedly.

XVI

Contrary to Grigory's expectations, during the next ten days over forty Cossacks joined up with Fomin. They were the remnants of various small bands which had been broken up by Soviet forces. They had lost their leaders and were wandering aimlessly about the region, and they gladly joined Fomin. It made no difference to them whom they served and whom they killed, so long as they were able to live their free, nomad life and plunder all who fell into their hands. They were a lot of desperadoes, and Fomin remarked contemptuously to Grigory as he looked at them: "Well, Melekhov, it's the riffraff that has joined us, not men. Gallows-birds, specially picked for the rope!" In his heart of hearts Fomin still regarded himself as a "fighter for the toiling people," and, though not so frequently as in the past, he would still say: "We're the liberators of the Cossacks." He stubbornly refused to abandon the most absurd of hopes. He again began

to wink at the pillaging committed by his companions-in-arms, taking the view that it was all a necessary evil to which he must be reconciled, that as time passed he would free himself of the looters, and that sooner or later he would be a genuine commander of insurgent forces and not the ataman of a miserable little band of brigands.

But Chumakov did not hesitate to call all the Fomin men "brigands," and argued until he was hoarse, trying to convince Fomin that he, too, was nothing but a brigand on a large scale. When they were alone, furious arguments frequently broke out between them.

"I'm an ideological fighter against the Soviet regime!" Fomin would shout, turning livid with anger. "And you call me the devil knows what! Don't you understand, you fool, that I'm fighting for an idea?"

"Don't try to pull my leg!" Chumakov retorted. "Don't try to pull the wool over my eyes! I'm not a child! Ideological, pah! You're a born brigand, and nothing more. And why be so afraid of the word? I don't get that at all."

"Because it's insulting, you foul-mouthed scum! I rose against the government and I've taken up arms against it. That doesn't make me a brigand."

"That's exactly why you are a brigand, because you're fighting against the government. Brigands have always been against the government ever since the beginning of time. No matter what the Soviet Government may be, it's the government, it's held on ever since 1917, and anyone who works against it is a brigand."

"You empty-pate! And how about General Krasnov, or Denikin? Were they brigands too?"

"Well, what else were they? They were brigands, only they wore epaulets. And the epaulets don't matter much. You and I can put them on. . . ."

Fomin banged his fist, spat, and, unable to think of any convincing arguments, cut short the useless dispute. It was no use arguing with Chumakov.

The majority of those who joined the band were excellently armed and dressed. Almost all of them had good horses accustomed to endless marches and easily covering a hundred versts a day. Some of them even had two horses: one to ride and the other to lead at the side. When necessary, by changing from horse to horse, allowing each to rest in turn, a rider with two mounts could cover some two hundred versts a day.

One day Fomin remarked to Grigory:

"If we'd each had two horses at the beginning, no devils on earth could have caught us. The militia and Red Army forces aren't allowed to take horses from the people, and they don't like doing it. But we can do what we like. We must get every man with a spare mount, and then they'll never catch us. Old folk say that's how the Tatars used to make their raids, each with two horses, and sometimes even with three. Who could catch such riders? And we must do the same. That Tatar wisdom is greatly to my fancy."

They quickly got hold of more horses, and for a time they did in fact become uncatchable. The mounted militia which had been newly organized in Vyesenskaya vainly tried to overtake them. The spare

horses made it possible for Fomin's numerically small force to throw off the enemy without difficulty and to get several marches ahead of him, so avoiding any dangerous clash.

Nonetheless, in the middle of May a force almost four times as large as the band succeeded in pinning it down against the Don not far from Bobrovsky village in Ust-Khoperskaya District. But after a brief fight the band broke through and retired along the bank of the river, losing eight men killed and wounded. Shortly after this engagement Fomin asked Grigory to take over the position of chief of staff.

"We need someone educated, so that we can move according to a plan, by a map, or some day they'll corner us and shake us up again. You take over the job, Grigory Panteleyevich."

"You don't need a staff to catch militiamen and cut their heads off," Grigory said moodily.

"Every detachment ought to have its staff; don't talk nonsense!"

"Give Chumakov the post if you can't live without a staff."

"But why don't you want to take it on?"

"I've got no idea of what it means."

"And has Chumakov?"

"No, Chumakov hasn't either."

"Then what the hell are you suggesting him for? You're an officer and you ought to have some idea of it. You ought to know all about tactics and that sort of thing."

"I was about as good an officer as you are a detachment commander! And there is only one tactic for us:

to roam about the steppe and keep our eyes skinned," Grigory said sarcastically.

Fomin winked at Grigory and threatened him with his forefinger.

"I can see right through you! Always keeping yourself in the shade? You want to keep out of the light? That won't save you, brother! It's all the same whether you're a troop commander or chief of staff. Do you think they'll make allowances if they catch you? You wait and see!"

"I'm not thinking of that at all; you're on the wrong track!" Grigory said, fixedly examining the sword-knot on his sabre-hilt. "But I don't want to take on a job I know nothing about."

"Well, if you don't want to, you needn't. We'll manage somehow without you," Fomin agreed huffily.

The situation had changed completely in the region; the gates of the prosperous Cossacks, who formerly had welcomed Fomin with great hospitality, were now bolted against him, and when the band arrived in a village the masters hurriedly scattered and hid in the orchards and gardens. The assizes of the Revolutionary Tribunal, which had arrived at Vyeshenskaya, sternly punished many Cossacks who in the past had made Fomin welcome. The news of the sentences sped through the districts and had a corresponding influence on the minds of those who had openly expressed their friendliness towards the bandits.

In the course of a fortnight Fomin made an extensive ride through all the districts of the upper Don. The band now numbered some hundred and thirty sabres, and it was being pursued, not by a hurriedly mus-

tered mounted group, but by several squadrons of the 13th Cavalry Regiment, which had been transferred from the Southern Front.

Many of those who had recently joined up with Fomin were from distant parts. They had found their way to the Don by devious roads. Some of them had escaped singly from prison gangs, from prisons and prison camps; but the majority consisted of a group of several dozen horsemen who had got separated from Maslak, and also remnants of the shattered Kurochkin band. The Maslak men willingly allowed themselves to be dispersed into the various troops, but the Kurochkin men did not wish to be broken up. They formed an entire separate troop, strongly welded together and holding themselves somewhat apart from the other members of the band. In battle or in bivouac they acted as a single group, they hung about together, and when they had pillaged some co-operative shop or warehouse, they poured everything into the troop's common pool and shared out the loot equally, strictly observing the principle of equality.

Several Terek and Kuban Cossacks in ragged Circassian coats, two Kalmyks, a Latvian in hunting boots reaching to his thighs, and five sailor anarchists in striped jerseys and faded sailors' kit made the Fomin band an even more motley collection than it was already.

"Well, you still argue that you aren't in command of brigands, but what do you call these? Fighters for ideas?" Chumakov asked Fomin one day, indicating the straggling column with his eyes. "We only want an unfrocked priest and a few swine in trousers,

and we'd have a complete collection of the blessed saints."

Fomin ignored the remark. His sole anxiety was to gather around him as many men as possible. He took nothing into account when he accepted volunteers. He himself questioned every man who expressed a wish to serve under his command, and said curtly:

"You are fit. I'll take you. Go to my chief of staff, Chumakov; he'll assign you to a troop and give you weapons."

In one of the villages of Migulinskaya District a well-dressed, curly-headed, swarthy youngster was brought to Fomin. He announced his desire to join the band. On questioning him Fomin learned that he was a native of Rostov and had recently been sentenced for armed robbery, but had escaped from the Rostov prison and, hearing of Fomin, had made his way to the upper Don area.

"What are you by race? An Armenian or Bulgarian?" Fomin asked him.

"I'm a Jew," the lad answered in some embarrassment.

Fomin was dumbfounded at this surprising avowal and was silent for some time. He did not know what to do in such an unexpected situation.

After pondering a little, he sighed deeply and said:

"Well, if you're a Jew you're a Jew. We don't look down our noses even at such. It means one more man. But can you ride a horse? No? You'll learn! We'll give you some quiet little mare to start with, and then you'll learn. Go to Chumakov, he'll assign you to your troop."

A few minutes later the infuriated Chumakov galloped up to Fomin.

"Are you mad or are you joking?" he shouted, reining his horse on to its hind legs. "What the devil have you sent me a Jew for? I won't accept him! Let him go to the four corners of the earth!"

"Take him, take him, it'll make one more!" Fomin said calmly.

But Chumakov foamed at the mouth and roared:

"I won't! I'll kill him, but I won't take him! The Cossacks are kicking up a row about it; you go and talk to them yourself."

While they were arguing and cursing each other the Cossacks had got hold of the young Jew by one of the baggage-wagons and were stripping him of his embroidered shirt and cloth trousers. As he tried the shirt on one of the Cossacks said: "Do you see that old bush out there beyond the village? Run to it at a trot and lie down. You'll lie there until we leave here, and when we've gone you can get up and go wherever you like. Don't come near us any more or we'll kill you. You'd better go back to Rostov, to your mummy. It isn't your Jewish job to fight. The Lord God taught you to trade, not to fight. We can manage that job without you."

The Jew was not accepted, but that very same day the Cossacks caught the half-wit Pasha, known in all the villages of the Vyeshenskaya District, and, roaring with laughter, assigned him to the Second Troop. He was captured in the steppe, brought to the village, and solemnly arrayed in a uniform taken from a dead Red Army man. The Cossacks showed him how to handle

a rifle and spent much time teaching him how to wield a sabre.

Grigory was on his way to his horses at the hitching-post, but, noticing the crowd that had gathered, he turned aside to find out what was happening. A roar of laughter caused him to hasten his steps, and then in the abrupt silence he heard someone's sober, monitorial voice: "No, not like that, Pasha! Who uses his sabre like that? You can chop wood that way, but not a man. You must do it like this, do you see? When you catch him, order him at once to go down on his knees, otherwise you'll find it awkward to sabre him when he's standing up. He goes down on his knees, and you come up like this, behind him, and slash at his neck. . . . Try not to cut him straight down, but so the blade makes a slanting cut. . . ."

Surrounded by bándits, the half-wit stood at attention, firmly clutching the hilt of his bared sabre. Smiling and beatifically screwing up his protruding grey eyes, he listened to the instructions being given by one of the Cossacks. The corners of his mouth were dribbling like a horse's with frothy bits of food, spittle was flowing copiously over his coppery-red beard on to his chest. He licked his dirty lips and said in a tongue-tied lisp:

"I understand it all, dearie. . . . I'll do just as you say. . . . I make the slave of God go down on his knees and I cut through his neck—right through. You've given me trousers and a shirt and boots. Only I haven't got a coat. You might give me a coat, and then I'll please you! I'll try with all my might!"

"You kill some commissar, and then you'll have a

coat. But you might tell us how you got married last year," one of the Cossacks suggested.

A look of animal fear flickered through the half-wit's dilated, filmy eyes. He uttered a string of curses and, to the accompaniment of a roar of laughter, began to tell some story. So loathsome was the scene that Grigory shuddered and hurriedly turned away. "And I've thrown in my lot with men like these!" he thought, bitterly hating himself and the wretched life he was leading.

He lay down by the hitching-posts, trying to close his ears to the idiot's shouts and the Cossacks' thunderous laughter. "I'll clear out tomorrow! It's about time!" he decided, looking at his well-fed horses and noting their splendid condition. He prepared thoughtfully and carefully for leaving the band. He had taken documents in the name of Ushakov off a dead militiaman and had sewn them in the lining of his greatcoat. For some two weeks he had been preparing his horses for a short but swift gallop. He watered them at regular times, curried them more diligently than he had ever curried his army mounts, by all legal and illegal means obtained grain for them at night; and his horses looked in better condition than any of the others. Especially his Ukrainian dapple-grey horse. Its glossy coat shone in the sun like Caucasian niello silver.

With such horses he could be sure of drawing away from any pursuit. He rose and went to a near-by hut. In a respectful tone he asked an old woman who was sitting on the threshold of the granary: "Have you got a scythe, granny?"

"We did have one somewhere, but the Lord knows where it is. What do you want it for?"

"I wanted to cut some green feed in your orchard for my horses. May I?"

The old woman reflected and said:

"When will you get off our necks? It's nothing but give me this and give me that. One lot comes and demands grain, another lot comes and drags off everything they set eyes on. I won't give you the scythe! Please yourself, but I won't give you it!"

"Why, can't you spare the grass, old woman?"

"Do you think more grass is going to grow on the bare spots? What am I to feed the cow on?"

"Isn't there any grass in the steppe?"

"Well then, go out into the steppe and cut it, my eagle. There's plenty out in the steppe."

Grigory said irritably: "You'd better let me have the scythe, granny. I'll cut a bit of grass and you'll have the rest. But if we turn our horses into your garden we'll have the lot."

The old woman looked harshly at Grigory and turned away.

"Go and get it yourself," she said. "It ought to be hanging in the shed."

Grigory found an old broken scythe in the shed. As he passed the old woman he distinctly heard her mutter: "There's no destroying you, damn you!"

It was something he had grown accustomed to. He had long known the Cossacks' attitude towards the band. "And they're right, too," he thought as he carefully swung the scythe, trying to mow the grass cleanly, leaving no edges standing. "What the devil do they

want with us? Nobody needs us; we're hindering everybody from living and working in peace. A stop must be put to this, and about time too!"

Occupied with his thoughts, he stood by his horses, watching them avidly seizing tufts of the tender young grass in their black, velvety lips. He was aroused from his meditation by a deep, youthful voice which was obviously on the point of breaking: "But what a fine horse! He's a real swan!"

Grigory looked in the direction of the speaker. A young Cossack who had only recently joined the band was staring at Grigory's grey horse and shaking his head delightedly. Eyeing the animal with fascination he walked round it several times, clicking his tongue.

"Is he your horse?" he asked.

"Why, what do you want to know for?" Grigory answered gruffly.

"Let's swap! I've got a bay of pure Don blood; he can take any obstacle, and he's spirited: you wouldn't believe how spirited he is! He's like lightning."

"Go to the devil!" Grigory said coldly.

The youngster was silent for a moment or two, then sighed bitterly and sat down not far off. He stared at the grey for a long time, then remarked: "You know he's got the heaves!"

Grigory silently picked at his teeth with a straw. He was beginning to like this artless youngster.

"Won't you swap, uncle?" the lad asked quietly, looking at Grigory with pleading eyes.

"No, I won't! I wouldn't even if you threw yourself in with your horse."

"But where did you get it?"

"I invented it myself."

"Oh, come on, tell me the truth!"

"The usual way: a mare dropped it."

"It's no use talking to such a fool!" the lad said in an offended tone, and went off.

Empty, as though dead, the village lay before Grigory. Except for Fomin's men, there was not a soul in sight. A wagon abandoned in a lane, a chopping-block in a yard with an axe hastily driven into it and a half-planed board near by, haltered bullocks lazily cropping the stunted grass in the middle of the street, an overturned bucket by the well-shaft—all these things showed that the peaceful life of the village had been unexpectedly violated, and that the villagers had left their tasks unfinished and had gone into hiding.

Grigory had seen a similar desolation and similar signs of hurried flight when the Cossack regiments had ridden through East Prussia. Now he had lived to see these things in his own country. With the same morose and hateful glances had he been welcomed then by the Germans, and now by the Cossacks of the upper Don. He recalled his talk with the old woman and mournfully looked about him, unbuttoning the collar of his shirt. That accursed pain was again gnawing at his heart.

The sun was burning the earth. About the lane hung the rapid scent of dust, of goose-grass and horse-sweat. In the orchards, on the lofty willows with their sprinkling of ragged nests, the rooks were croaking. A little steppeland stream, fed by springs somewhere at the top of a ravine, slowly flowed through the village, dividing it in two. On both sides the broad Cossack yards

sloped down to the water, smothered in a dense growth of orchards, with cherry-trees shading the windows of the huts, and apple-trees with stout branches holding out their green foliage and young clusters of fruit to the sun.

With misty eyes Grigory looked at the yard overgrown with ragged plantain, at the hut with yellow shutters and roofed with straw thatch, at the lofty well-crane. By the threshing-floor, on one of the posts of the old wattle fence hung the rain-bleached skull of a horse; the holes of its empty eye-sockets were yawning black. A green pumpkin plant entwined the same post, climbing in a spiral towards the light. It had climbed to the top of the post and was clinging with its little tendrils to the teeth and the protuberances of the horse's skull. Its free end, in search of support, was already extending to a branch of a guelder-rosebush standing not far off.

Had he seen all this before in a dream, or in his distant childhood? Gripped by a sudden attack of passionate yearning, he lay chest downward under the fence, covered his face with his palms, and got up only when the distant, long-drawn-out shout "To horse!" reached his ears.

That night during the march he rode out of the ranks, halted as though to adjust his saddle, and stood listening to the dying clatter of hoofs. Then, springing into the saddle, he galloped off at right angles to the road.

For five versts he urged on his horses without pause, then slowed down to a walking pace and listened. Was there any sound of pursuit behind him? All was quiet in the steppe. Only snipe were calling plaintively

to one another on sandy pits, and somewhere very, very far off the baying of a dog was faintly to be heard.

In the black sky there was a golden sprinkle of twinkling stars. Over the steppe was silence and a breeze laden with the native and bitter scent of wormwood. Grigory rose in his saddle and with all his lungs drew in a deep breath of relief.

XVII

Long before dawn he galloped into the meadow which stretches before Tatarsky. Below the village, where the Don was shallower, he stripped, tied his clothes, boots, and weapons to his horses' heads, and, holding his cartridge pouch in his teeth, set out with the animals to swim the river. The water seared him with its unbearable cold. In an attempt to keep warm he paddled swiftly with his right arm, holding the reins tied together in his left hand, quietly encouraging the grunting and snorting horses.

On the bank he hurriedly dressed, tightened the saddle girths, and, to warm the horses, galloped swiftly towards the village. His wet greatcoat, the wet flaps of the saddle, his damp shirt, all chilled his body. His teeth chattered, a shiver ran down his back, and he trembled all over. But soon the swift ride warmed him, and not far from the village he dropped into a walk, looking around him and listening intently. He decided to leave the horses in a gully. He dropped down to the bottom of the gully over the loose, stony rubble of the slope. The stones clattered dryly under the horses' hoofs, and fiery sparks were struck out by their shoes.

He tied the animals to a withered elm he had known ever since his childhood and walked to the village.

And there was the old Melekhov house, the dark cluster of apple-trees, the well-crane pointing up to the Great Bear. Panting with agitation, he dropped down to the river, cautiously crawled through the wattle fence of the Astakhovs' yard, and went up to the unshuttered window. He could hear only the hurried beating of his heart and the rushing sound of the blood in his head. He knocked quietly on the window-frame—so quietly that he himself hardly heard the sound. Aksinya silently came to the window and looked out. He saw her press her hands to her breast and heard a faint groan escape from her lips. He signed to her to open the window and slipped his rifle off his shoulder. She threw the window wide open.

"Quieter! How are you? Don't open the door. I'll come through the window," he whispered.

He stood on the ledge of the house wall. Her bare arms caught him around the neck. They trembled and quivered against his shoulders so much, did those dear, precious arms, that their trembling was communicated to him.

"Aksinya—wait—take the rifle," he stammered, whispering almost inaudibly.

Gripping the hilt of his sabre he stepped inside over the window-sill.

He wanted to embrace her; but she dropped heavily on her knees before him, put her arms around his legs, and pressed her face to his wet greatcoat. All her body shook with suppressed sobs. He lifted her, seated her

on the bench. Leaning against him, hiding her face on his chest, she was silent, shuddering again and again, and biting the lapel of his greatcoat to stifle her sobbing and to avoid awakening the children.

So it seemed she, too, strong as she was, had been broken with suffering. Her life, too, had been bitter during these past months. He stroked the hair fallen about her back, stroked her burning forehead, wet with sweat. He let her weep her fill, then asked:

"Are the children all right?"

"Yes."

"And Dunya?"

"Dunya too. Alive—and well. . . ."

"Is Mikhail at home? But wait a bit! Do stop crying, my shirt's all wet with your tears. . . . Aksinya! My darling, that's enough. There's no time for tears, time's short. . . . Is Mikhail at home?"

Aksinya wiped her face and pressed Grigory's cheeks with her wet palms. Smiling through her tears, her eyes fixed on her beloved, she said quietly:

"I won't any more. . . . I shan't cry any more. . . . Mikhail's not in Tatarsky; he's been at Vyeshenskaya for the past two months, serving in some army unit. Come and look at the children. Oh, we weren't expecting you and we never hoped. . . ."

Mishatka and Polyushka were sleeping on the bed, their arms and legs flung out. Grigory bent over them, stood thus for a moment or two, then tiptoed away and sat down silently beside Aksinya.

"How about you?" she asked in a burning whisper. "How did you get here? And where have you been all this time? But supposing they catch you?"

"I've come to fetch you. I don't think they'll catch me. Will you come?"

"Where to?"

"With me. I've left the band. I was with Fomin, did you hear?"

"Yes. But where can I go with you?"

"To the south. To the Kuban or farther. We'll manage to live and get our food somehow or other. I can do any work. My hands need to work, not to fight. I've been sick at heart during these past months. . . . But we'll talk about that later."

"How about the children?"

"We'll leave them with Dunya. Then we'll see later on. Later we'll take them too. Well? Will you come?"

"Grisha—my dearest Grisha—"

"Don't, dear! No tears! That's enough! We can cry later, there'll be plenty of time for that. . . . Get yourself ready; I've got horses waiting in a gully. Well, will you come?"

"Why, what did you think?" she suddenly said aloud, and fearfully pressed her hand to her lips and glanced at the children. "What did you think?" she asked again in a whisper. "Is my life so sweet alone by myself? I'll go, Grisha, my darling. I'll go on foot, I'll crawl after you, but I won't stay here alone any longer. I can't live without you. . . . Kill me, but don't leave me again."

She held him close. He kissed her and glanced furtively at the window. Summer nights are short. They must hurry.

"Perhaps you'd like to lie down for a while?" Aksinya asked.

"What are you thinking of?" he exclaimed in alarm. "It'll be dawn soon, we must be getting off. Dress and go and call Dunya. We'll talk it over with her. We must get to Sukhoi dell in the dark. We'll spend the day in the wood and move on at night. Can you ride a horse?"

"Lord, I'd manage anyhow, and gladly on horseback! All the time I'm wondering whether I'm dreaming it all. I often dream of you . . . and every time you're different." She hurriedly combed her hair, holding the hairpins in her teeth, and spoke so quietly he could hardly make out what she said. She swiftly dressed and went to the door.

"Shall I wake the children up?" she asked. "You could take a look at them."

"No, don't!" Grigory said resolutely.

He took his pouch out of his cap and began to roll a cigarette; but as soon as Aksinya had gone he hurriedly went across to the bed and kissed the children with long kisses. Then he remembered Natalya and much else in his ill-starred life and burst into tears.

As she crossed the threshold, Dunya said: "Well, greetings, Brother! So you've come home? No matter how much you roam about the steppe. . . ." And she broke into lamentations: "The children have lived to see their father. . . . They've been made orphans with their father still alive."

Grigory embraced her and said sternly: "Quieter! You'll wake the children up. Drop all that, Sister! I've heard it all before. I've got enough tears and sorrow of my own. I didn't send for you to hear this. Will you take the children and look after them?"

"But where are you going?"

"I'm clearing out and taking Aksinya with me. Will you look after the children? I'll get work, and then I'll take them."

"Why, what else should I do? If you're both going, of course I'll take them. They can't be left in the street, and you can't throw them on the mercy of strangers."

Grigory silently kissed her and said: "My great thanks to you, Sister. I knew you wouldn't refuse."

She sat down on the chest and asked: "When are you going? At once?"

"Yes."

"But how about the house? And the farm?"

Aksinya answered hesitantly: "You do what you like. Let someone live in it or do whatever you like. What is left of the clothing and property you have for yourself."

"What shall I tell people? They'll ask where you've gone, and what shall I tell them?" Dunya asked.

"Say you don't know anything, that's all," Grigory said, and turned to Aksinya. "Aksinya, hurry! Don't take much with you. Just a warm jacket, two or three skirts, whatever linen you can, and food for a meal or two, that's all."

The dawn was just beginning to break when, after saying good-bye to Dunya and kissing the still sleeping children, Grigory and Aksinya went out into the porch. They dropped down to the Don and made their way along the bank to the gully.

"You and I once went off to Yagodnoye just like

this," Grigory said. "Only you had a bigger bundle that time, and we ourselves were younger...."

Rapturous with joy, Aksinya glanced sidelong at him and answered: "But all the time I'm afraid I shall find I've been dreaming. Give me your hand, let me touch it, or I shan't believe it." She laughed quietly, pressing against his shoulder as she went.

He saw her eyes swollen with tears and shining with happiness, her cheeks, pale in the gloom of the early morning. He smiled indulgently and thought: "She just got herself ready and came as though going out on a visit.... Nothing frightens her; she's a great lass!"

As though in answer to his thoughts, she said: "You see the sort of woman I am.... You whistled me like a dog, and I ran after you. It's my love and yearning for you, Grisha, that have tied me so tight.... I'm only sorry for the children, but I wouldn't say one 'Oh' over myself. I'll follow you everywhere, even to death."

Hearing their footsteps, the horses whinnied quietly. Dawn was coming on swiftly. Already a narrow strip of sky on the eastern fringe was perceptibly rosy. A mist was rising from the waters of the Don.

Grigory untied the horses and helped Aksinya into the saddle. The stirrup-straps were rather long for her legs. Angry at his own lack of foresight, he shortened the straps, then mounted the second horse.

"Keep up behind me, Aksinya. When we get out of the gully we'll ride at a gallop. That won't shake you up so much. Don't slacken the reins, the horse you're riding doesn't like it. And mind your knees!

He gets playful at times and tries to snap at your knees with his teeth. Well, off we go!"

It was some eight versts to Sukhoi dell. They had soon covered the distance and were close to the woods by sunrise. On the fringe Grigory dismounted and helped Aksinya off her horse.

"Well, how did you find it? Riding horseback is hard when you're not used to it, isn't it?" he said with a smile.

Flushed with the gallop, Aksinya flashed her black eyes at him.

"It's fine! Better than going on foot. Only my legs—" She smiled with embarrassment. "You turn round, Grisha, and I'll have a look. Something's pinching the skin—it must have got chafed."

"That's nothing, that'll pass off," he reassured her. "Walk about a bit, your legs look as if they're trembling." He screwed up his eyes and said in a gentle, bantering tone, "You're a fine Cossack!"

At the very head of the dell he found a small glade and said: "This'll be our camp; make yourself at home, Aksinya."

He unsaddled the horses, hobbled them, and laid the saddles and his weapons under a bush. A copious, heavy dew lay on the grass, and under the dew the grass seemed dove-grey; but on the slope, where an early morning gloom still lurked, it gleamed a dull blue. Orange bumble-bees were dozing in the half-opened chalices of the flowers. Skylarks were ringing above the steppe; in the grain, in the aromatic grasses of the steppe, the quails were calling: "Time for bed! Time for bed!" Close to an oak sapling Grigory

crushed down the grass and stretched himself out with his head on a saddle. The loud piping of the quails, the lulling song of the skylarks, and the warm wind, floating from beyond the Don, from sands that had not cooled during the night, all disposed him to sleep. Others could do as they liked, but for Grigory, who had not slept for several nights in succession, it was time for sleep. The quails persuaded him and, overcome with sleep, he closed his eyes. Aksinya sat down beside him and was silent, thoughtfully plucking the violet petals of a flower with her lips.

"Grisha, you don't think anyone will catch us here?" she asked quietly, touching Grigory's scrubby cheeks with the flower stalk.

He aroused himself with difficulty from his drowsy oblivion and said hoarsely: "There's nobody out in the steppe. It's the slack season now. I'll have a sleep, Aksinya, and you watch the horses. Then you can sleep. I'm worn out for lack of sleep. It's four days since—We'll talk afterwards."

"Sleep, my darling; sleep well!"

She bent over him, gently brushed a strand of hair from his brow, and softly touched his cheek with her lips.

"My dear, Grisha darling, the grey hairs you've got!" she whispered. "So you're growing old? And yet it's not so long ago that you were a boy..." She looked with a faint, mournful smile into his face.

He slept, with his mouth open a little, breathing regularly. His black lashes, their tips bleached by the sun, quivered very gently; his upper lip stirred, revealing his firm clenched white teeth. She looked at

him more closely and only then noticed how much he had changed during the past few months of their separation. There was a harsh, almost cruel expression in the deep vertical furrows between his brows, in the folds of his mouth, in the prominent cheekbones. And for the first time it occurred to her that he must be terrible in battle, on a horse, with bared sabre. Lowering her eyes, she glanced at his big knotty hands and sighed for some reason.

After a while she quietly rose and crossed the glade, holding her skirt high above the dewy grass to keep it from getting wet. Somewhere not far off, a little stream was purling and tinkling over stones. She dropped down to the watercourse, which was lined with flat, pale-green mossy boulders, drank the cold spring water, washed, and rubbed her flushed face dry with her kerchief. There was a quiet unfading smile on her lips; her eyes were bright with joy. Gregory was with her again! Once more the unknown beckoned her towards an ephemeral happiness. Many tears had Aksinya shed during sleepless nights, many sorrows had she borne in the past few months. Only the day before she had been in the garden, and women hoeing potatoes on neighbouring patches had begun to sing a mournful song. Her heart had constricted painfully, and involuntarily she had listened:

*Come home, grey geese, come back home,
Time your swimming was done, time it
was done.
Time my crying was done—
Woman, crying alone.*

So a woman's high-pitched voice sang, lamenting her wretched fate, and Aksinya lost her self-control; the tears spurted from her eyes. She tried to find oblivion in work, to stifle the longing which stirred in her heart. But the tears misted her eyes, dropped on the green leaves of the potato plants, on her helpless hands, and she saw nothing and could not work. She threw down the hoe and lay on the ground, burying her face in her hands and letting the tears flow freely.

Only yesterday she had been cursing her life, and everything around her had seemed as grey and joyless as a cloudy day. But today the world seemed exultant and bright, as though after a plentiful summer down-pour. "We too will find our place in life," she thought, gazing absently at the fretted oak leaves flaming in the slanting rays of the rising sun.

Gay sweet-smelling flowers were growing by the bushes and in the hot sunlight. Aksinya picked a great armful of them, carefully seated herself not far from Grigory, and, remembering her youth, began to weave a garland. It was very pretty. She sat admiring it, then thrust several rosy flowers of eglantine into it and laid it at Grigory's head.

About nine o'clock Grigory was awakened by the neighing of the horses and sat up in alarm, groping around him for his weapons.

"There's nobody here," Aksinya said quietly. "What are you afraid of?"

He rubbed his eyes and smiled sleepily.

"I've learned to live like a hare. You sleep, and even in your sleep you peep with one eye and start

at every sound. . . . It takes a long time to get out of that habit, girl. Have I been asleep long?"

"No. Would you like to sleep longer?"

"I ought to sleep the clock round in order to get all the rest I need. We'd better have breakfast. I've got bread and a knife in my saddle-bags; you get them, and I'll go and water the horses."

He rose, took off his greatcoat, and wriggled his shoulders. The sun was hot now. A wind rustled the leaves of the trees, and their rustling drowned the gentle murmur of the stream.

He went down to the water, made a little dam of stones and twigs, then with his sabre dug up earth and packed it into the openings between the stones. When the water gathered behind his dam, he led the horses down and let them drink, then removed their bits and turned them loose to graze again.

At breakfast Aksinya said: "Where shall we be going from here?"

"To Morozovsky. We'll ride as far as Platov, and then we'll go on on foot."

"How about the horses?"

"We'll leave them somewhere."

"That's a pity, Grigory. They're such good horses; you simply couldn't get tired of looking at that grey. Have we got to leave him behind? Where did you get him?"

"Where did I get him—" Grigory smiled cheerlessly. "I looted him from a Ukrainian."

After a brief silence he said: "Pity or not, we've got to leave them behind. It's not for us to trade in horses."

"But what are you riding with a rifle for? What good is it to you? God grant nobody sees it, it'll bring us a lot of trouble."

"Who's going to see us at night? I kept it just in case. I feel lost without it. When we leave the horses I'll leave the rifle behind too. It won't be needed after that."

After breakfast they lay down on his greatcoat. He vainly fought his drowsiness, while Aksinya, resting on one elbow, told him about the life she had lived without him and how much she had suffered during the last months. He heard her level voice through his overwhelming sleepiness and had no strength to open his heavy eyelids. At times he stopped hearing her altogether. Her voice receded into the distance, sounded fainter, and died away entirely. He shuddered and awoke, but in a few minutes he again closed his eyes. His weariness was greater than his desire and will.

"... They used to pine for you, and ask: 'Where's Father?' I did what I could with them, mostly by kindness. They got quite attached to me and didn't visit Dunya so often. Polyushka's quiet and gentle. I made her rag dolls and she would sit with them under the table, busying herself with them. But once Mishatka ran in from the street trembling all over. 'What's the matter?' I asked him. He burst into tears, and such bitter tears too! 'The other boys won't play with me, they say my daddy's a bandit. Mummy, is it true he's a bandit? What are bandits?' I told him: 'Your daddy isn't a bandit at all. He's just—unlucky.' But he pestered me with his questions: 'Why is he

unlucky, and what does "unlucky" mean?" I simply couldn't explain it to him. It was they who started to call me 'Mother', Grisha; you mustn't think I taught them to. But Mikhail was quite good to them—quite kind. He would never speak to me, he turned his back or walked past; but more than once he brought sugar for them from Vyeshenskaya. Prokhor was always grieving about you.. 'There's a good man lost,' he used to say. Last week he came and talked about you until his eyes streamed with tears. . . . They made a search of my hut, looking for weapons under the eaves, in the cellar, everywhere. . . ."

He fell asleep without hearing her story to the end. Above his head the leaves of a young elm rustled in the wind. Yellow gleams of light glided across his face. For a long time Aksinya kissed his closed eyes, then she too fell asleep, her cheek pressed against Grigory's arm, smiling even in her sleep.

They left Sukhoi dell late at night, when the moon had risen. After two hours' riding they dropped from a rise down to the Chir river. Corn-crakes were calling in the meadowland, frogs were croaking in the reedy backwaters of the river, and somewhere in the distance a bittern boomed hollowly.

Along the river-side stretched a mass of orchards, forbiddingly sombre in the mist.

Not far from a little bridge, Grigory halted. A midnight silence wrapped the village. He touched up his horse with his heels and turned aside. He did not like riding across the bridge. He did not trust this silence and was afraid of it. On the outskirts of the

village they forded the stream and had just turned into a narrow lane when a man rose from a ditch, three more behind him.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

Grigory started at the shout as though he had been struck, and pulled on the reins. At once mastering himself, he cried: "Friends!" and, sharply turning his horse, managed to whisper to Aksinya: "Back! Follow me!"

The four men of the outpost stationed for the night by a grain-requisitioning detachment silently and unhurriedly came towards them. One halted to light a cigarette, striking a match. Grigory brought his whip hard down on Aksinya's horse. The animal reared and tore away in a gallop. Bending over his horse's neck, Grigory galloped after it. There was a silence which lasted for several oppressive seconds, then a ragged echoing volley rang out and spurts of fire pierced the darkness. Grigory heard the burning whistle of the bullets and a long-drawn-out shout:

"To arms!"

When some two hundred yards from the river, Grigory overtook the grey horse, which was moving at a long, sweeping gallop, and shouted to Aksinya as he drew level:

"Bend lower, Aksinya! Bend lower!"

But she pulled on the reins and, throwing herself back, toppled sideways. Grigory managed to hold her or she would have fallen.

"Are you wounded? Where have they hit you? Speak!" he asked hoarsely.

She was silent and hung more and more heavily

on his arm. Pressing her to himself as they galloped, he gasped and whispered:

"For God's sake! Just a word! What's the matter with you?"

But there was not a word or groan from the silent Aksinya.

Some two versts outside the village he turned sharply off the road, made towards a ravine, dismounted, and lifted Aksinya off the horse, gently laying her on the ground.

He removed her warm jacket, tore the thin cotton blouse and shirt at her breast, and groped for the wound. The bullet had entered her body through the left shoulder-blade, shattering the bone and emerging obliquely below the right collar-bone. With blood-stained, trembling hands he took his field dressing and a clean undershirt from his saddle-bag. He raised Aksinya, put his knee behind her back, and began to bandage the wound, trying to stanch the blood spouting out below the collar-bone. The pieces of shirt and bandage were swiftly darkened and soaked. Blood was even flowing from her half-open mouth, and it bubbled and gurgled in her throat. And, going numb with horror, he realized that it was all over, that the most terrible thing that could happen in his life had already happened.

Down the steep slope, down a little path trodden out in the grass and sprinkled with meadow saxifrage, he cautiously made his way into the ravine, carrying Aksinya in his arms. Her helplessly hanging head lay on his shoulder. He heard her whistling, sobbing breath and felt the warm blood leaving her body and

flowing out of her mouth on to his chest. The two horses followed him down into the ravine. Snorting, clanking their bits, they began to chew the juicy grass. She died in his arms a little before dawn. She did not recover consciousness. He silently kissed her on her lips, which were cold and salty with blood, carefully lowered her to the grass, and rose. Some unknown force struck him on the chest, and he fell flat; but he at once jumped to his feet in terror. He fell yet again, striking his bare head painfully on a stone. Then, without rising from his knees, he drew his sabre from its scabbard and began to dig a grave. The earth was damp and soft. He worked with great haste, but a choking feeling clutched his throat, and to breathe more easily he tore open the shirt at his neck. The early morning freshness chilled his sweating chest, and then he found it not so hard to work. He dug out the earth with his hands and his cap, not resting a moment; but while he was digging a grave to the depth of his waist, much time passed.

Grigory buried his Aksinya by the brilliant morning light. As she lay in the grave he folded her deathly pale dark-skinned arms across her chest and covered her face with her kerchief, so that the earth should not fill her glazing, half-open eyes as they gazed immovably at the sky. Then he took his farewell of her, firmly believing that they would not be parted for long.

With his palms he diligently pressed down the damp yellow clay over the mound and remained long on his knees beside the grave, his head bowed, his body swaying a little.

Now he had nothing to hurry for. Everything was finished.

The sun rose above the ravine through the smoky haze of a burning wind from the east. Its rays silvered the mass of grey hair on Grigory's head and slipped over his pale and terribly set face. As though awaking from an oppressive sleep, he raised his head and saw above him the black sky and the blindingly glittering, black disk of the sun.

XVIII

In the early spring, when the snow vanishes and the grass which has been buried under it during the winter begins to dry, fires break out in the steppe. Flames driven by the wind fly along in streams, greedily consuming the dry foxtail grass, leaping over the lofty stalks of the thistle-grass, slipping across the brown heads of the mugwort, spreading out in the hollows. And afterwards the acrid, burning smell of charred and cracked earth hangs over the steppe. All around, the young grass grows a merry green, innumerable skylarks flutter in the azure heaven above, migrant geese feed on the nourishing herbage, and the bustards settle for the summer and build their nests. But wherever the steppe fires have passed, the dead, charred earth blackens ominously. No birds nest on it, no animals come, and only the wind, winged and swift, carries the dove-grey ash and the dark, pungent dust far over the steppe.

Like the steppe scorched with fires, Grigory's life also turned black. He had been deprived of every-

thing which was dear to his heart. Pitiless death had taken everything from him, had destroyed everything. Only the children were left. But he himself still clung convulsively to the earth, as though his broken life was indeed of some value to himself and others.

After burying Aksinya he wandered aimlessly about the steppe for three days; but he rode neither home nor to Vyeshenskaya to make his act of submission. On the fourth day, abandoning the horses in one of the villages of the Ust-Khoperskaya District, he crossed the Don and made his way on foot to the Slashchevsky oak forest, on the fringe of which the Fomin band had first been shattered in the previous April. Even then, in April, he had heard that deserters had settled in the forest. And to them he went, for he had no desire to return to Fomin.

For several days he wandered about the enormous forest. He was tortured with hunger, but he could not bring himself to go to any human habitation. With the death of Aksinya he had lost his native wit and his former daring. The snap of a breaking twig, a rustle in the dense forest, the cry of a night bird, all reduced him to terror and dismay. He lived on the unripe fruits of wild strawberries, tiny wild mushrooms, and the leaves of hazel bushes, and grew terribly emaciated. At the close of the fifth day deserters found him in the forest and took him to their dug-out.

There were seven of them. They were all men from local villages and had settled in the forest in the autumn of the previous year, to avoid being mobilized. In their roomy dug-out they lived as comfortably as

at home, and had need of hardly anything. At night they often went off to visit their families, bringing back rusks, millet, bread, flour, and potatoes. And they had no difficulty in obtaining meat for stewing from other villages by occasionally stealing a sheep. One of the deserters, who had served in the 12th Cossack Regiment, recognized Grigory, and they accepted him in their midst without any great wrangling.

He lost count of the tormentingly endless days. He lived somehow or other in the forest until October, but when the autumn rains set in, and then the cold weather, a longing for his children, for his native village, awoke with new and unexpected strength within him.

To while away the time he sat for days on end on his plank bed, carving spoons out of wood, hollowing out dishes, dexterously fashioning toy figures of people and animals from soft wood. He tried not to think of anything and not to let the venomous longing find its way to his heart. During the daytime he succeeded, but through the long winter nights the yearning engendered of his memories overwhelmed him. He tossed long and restlessly on the pallet and could not get to sleep. In the daytime none of the other inhabitants of the dug-out heard a word of complaint from him; but at night he frequently awoke trembling and, passing his hand over his face, found his cheeks and his dense six months' growth of beard wet with tears.

He often dreamed of the children, of Aksinya, his mother, and all his other dear ones who were no long-

er among the living. All his life lay in the past; but the past seemed a brief and fretful sleep. "Just to see the old places once more and feast my eyes on the children; and then I can die," he often thought.

One day in the early spring Chumakov unexpectedly turned up. He was wet to the waist, and as cheery and active as ever. After drying his clothes by the fire and getting warm, he sat down on the pallet beside Grigory.

"We've done a bit of wandering, Melekhov, since you left us. We've been almost to Astrakhan, and in the Kalmyk steppe. . . . We've travelled over the wide world! And the blood we've shed—there's no reckoning it! The Reds took Yakov Yefimovich's wife as a hostage and confiscated his property, so he went mad and gave orders that everybody who served the Soviet regime was to be killed. And we began to kill them all off: teachers and doctors and agricultural instructors. . . . The devil knows who we didn't kill! But now they've finished us, once and for all," he said, sighing and still shivering with cold. "They smashed us near Tishanskaya the first time, and then again near Solomny a week ago. We were hemmed in on three sides at night; they left us only one way out up a hill, and there the snow was up to the horses' bellies. They opened fire with machine-guns at dawn; and that was the beginning of the end. They mowed us all down with machine-guns. Fomin's young son and myself are the only two who escaped. He—Fomin, I mean—had been taking his son Davydka about with him ever since autumn. Yakov Yefimovich him-

self was killed. . . . I saw him killed with my own eyes. The first bullet hit him in the leg and smashed his knee-cap, the second grazed his head. Three times he fell from his horse. We stopped and picked him up and put him in his saddle, but he would ride on a little way and then fall again. The third bullet got him—right in the side. And then we had to leave him. When I had galloped a little way I looked back, and two horsemen were already slashing him with their sabres as he lay. . . .”

“Well, and that’s how it was bound to be,” Grigory said unconcernedly.

Chumakov spent the night in the dug-out, and in the morning said good-bye.

“Where are you off to?” Grigory asked.

Smiling, Chumakov answered: “To look for an easy life. Perhaps you’ll come with me?”

“No, you go off by yourself.”

“You’re right, I couldn’t live with you. Your craft is carving cups and spoons, and that’s not in my line,” Chumakov said derisively. He took off his cap and vowed: “God save you, peaceable brigands, for your hospitality and shelter. May God grant you a merry life, for you’re having a pretty gloomy time here! You live in the forest twiddling your thumbs day in day out, d’you call that life?”

After Chumakov’s departure Grigory lived another week in the forest, then made ready to depart.

“Going home?” one of the deserters asked him.

And, for the first time during his stay in the dug-out, Grigory smiled, very faintly. “Yes, I’m going home.”

"You should wait till spring. There'll be an amnesty for May Day, and then we'll all go home."

"No, I can't wait," Grigory answered, and he said good-bye.

Next morning he reached the Don opposite Tatarsky. He stood gazing at his native yard, turning pale with the excitement of his joy. Then he slipped off his rifle, took out the shreds of hemp he used for cleaning it, and his little bottle of machine-oil, and for some reason counted his cartridges. He had twelve clips and twenty-six loose bullets.

Below the cliff the ice had retreated from the edge. The translucent green water was splashing and breaking away the brittle ice along the bank. Grigory threw his rifle and pistol into the Don, then poured his cartridges after them and wiped his hands thoroughly on the edge of his greatcoat.

Below the village he crossed the Don over the blue, half-thawed and pitted March ice and walked with long strides towards his house. When he was still some distance away he saw Mishatka on the slope leading down to the landing-stage and could hardly keep himself from running to the lad.

Mishatka was breaking off the icicles hanging from a stone, throwing them away, and watching fixedly as the blue fragments went rolling down the slope.

Grigory went along to the slope and, panting, called hoarsely to his son: "Mishatka! Little son!"

Mishatka glanced at him in terror and dropped his eyes. He guessed that this bearded and terrible-looking man was his father.

All the gentle and tender words which Grigory had whispered, as night after night in the oak forest he recalled his children, now fled from his memory. Dropping down on his knees, kissing his son's rosy, cold little hands, in a choking voice he uttered only the words:

"Little son. . . . Little son. . . ."

Then he lifted him in his arms. Gazing greedily with dry, ecstatically burning eyes into the boy's face, he asked: "How are you all? How's Aunty, Polyushka—are they all right?"

Still not looking at his father, Mishatka quietly answered: "Aunty Dunya's all right, but Polyushka died in the autumn—of diphtheria. And Uncle Mikhail's a soldier. . . ."

And now that little thing for which Grigory had yearned through so many sleepless nights had come to pass. He stood at the gate of his own home, holding his son in his arms.

This was all life had left to him, all that for a little longer gave him kinship with the earth and with the spacious world that lay glittering under the chilly sun.

REQUEST TO READERS

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